





THE LIBRARY
OF
THE UNIVERSITY
OF CALIFORNIA
LOS ANGELES



ALLAN SCOTT

TT028 4/11/ -

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

THE ROOM

The BORZOI POCKET BOOKS

HUNGER

Knut Hamsun

ANDALUSIA

W. S. Maugham

JAVA HEAD

Joseph Hergesheimer

TARAS BULBA

Nikolay Gogol

LONDON RIVER

H. M. Tomlinson

PETER JAMESON

Gilbert Frankau

170 CHINESE POEMS

Translated by Arthur Waley

PREJUDICES: First Series

H. L. Mencken

THE GREEN GODDESS

William Archer

CAESAR OR NOTHING

Pío Baroja

GROWTH OF THE SOIL

Knut Hamsun

THE POPULAR THEATRE

George Jean Nathan

THE ROOM

by

G. B. Stern



NEW YORK
ALFRED · A · KNOPF

COPYRIGHT, 1922, BY
G. B. STERN

*Published, October, 1922
Pocket Book Edition, Published August, 1923*

*Set up, electrotyped, and printed by the Vail-Ballou Co., Binghamton, N. Y.
Paper furnished by W. F. Etherington & Co., New York, N. Y.
Bound by the H. Wolff Estate, New York, N. Y.*

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

College
Library

PR
6037
S839n

TO

SHEILA KAYE-SMITH

With love and in memory
of a country cottage in Kensington

CONTENTS

PART I

DULCE DOMUM	11
-------------	----

PART II

“DOUG”	157
--------	-----

PART III

ARCADIA—MORE OR LESS	175
----------------------	-----

PART IV

THE GIRL IN THE ROOM	235
----------------------	-----

1115924

PART I
DULCE DOMUM

[I]

AUNT LAVVY called Hal as he was passing through the hall:

"Is that you, Hal dear? Will you be going anywhere near Platt's?"

"No, but I can quite easily. Why? Do you want me to look and see if your fortune's still there?" For Aunt Lavvy banked at the local branch of Platt's; it was only open three times a week from ten A. M. to twelve; Buckler's Cross was not as yet a very important country suburb.

Aunt Lavvy wanted an open cheque for five pounds cashed. And after Hal had teased her a bit more as to what she could possibly want with all that money at once, he took the cheque and departed. But first of all he kissed her, because she was rather a dear little old lady, and was just the right height for the manly embraces of seventeen-and-a-half. Most men feel it a merit in their more aged female possessions to be small and frail-looking, to have pink cheeks and silvery hair, and a soft voice and delicate white hands. . . . Aunt Lavvy achieved all this; she was the perfect cliché among dear little old ladies, down to the very lavender-bags she placed among her linen. That was why all the young Maxwells adored her. Directly a new visitor came to the Laburnums, she

or he was hauled along as a matter of course to see Aunt Lavvy and be approved by her; and her sweetness and little-old-ladyness made them vaguely discontented with their own female home belongings, equally ancient, but possibly more strident.

Correctly speaking, she was not an aunt at all. Because the Maxwells' house was at one time too large for them, she had come as a paying-guest during a financial slump. And Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell encouraged "Aunt Lavvy" among the children, as it covered the weekly payment of two guineas with a soft slither of sentiment, and created a legend in the eyes of the world—the Buckler's Cross world. Later on, when the financial slump was over, and the Maxwells' house was too small for them, Aunt Lavvy remained on in the best bedroom—by dint of increasing pressure in the rest of the house—because to evict her would have destroyed the aunt legend, and clearly revealed the former reason of her being. Besides, she was already a tradition: "What should we do without Aunt Lavvy?" Everybody took their little confidences to Aunt Lavvy—except, perhaps, Mrs. Maxwell. Mrs. Maxwell had rather a reddish face, and a haggard neck, and a very loud bustling voice. No, she did not take her little confidences to Aunt Lavvy. But they got on very well together. They had known each other as girls.

And Ursula also kept rather aloof from the careless edict that Aunt Lavvy was to be worshipped. But then Ursula, like most flappers of sixteen, was

in a very tumbled condition of hair and spirit. It was well known that she had had a rave on Aunt Lavvy at one time; and there is no queen so de-throned as a schoolgirl's last rave but one. Not that Ursula went to school; she "studied" with Miss Roberts, the governess. Lottie also did her lessons with Miss Roberts—but Lottie was only ten; hence the distinction in terms. But it was the same Miss Roberts. Grace and Nina had gone to a High School about twenty minutes by train from Buckler's Cross. They were only separated by two years in age. But Ursula came five years after Nina, with Hal between; and the governess was originally provided for her till she was old enough to follow her sisters. By the time she was nine, Lottie was three, and Miss Roberts had to be kept on for Lottie—Nurse had quite sufficient to do with William, just born—and Mr. Maxwell, still careful, though the meagre period was over, thought it extravagant to pay Miss Roberts for the education of Lottie alone. So Ursula continued to do her lessons with the governess, only they becomes studies, and the nursery automatically merged into a schoolroom whenever Nurse and William were not occupying it. By the time William was five, the nursery was declared altogether schoolroom, and would have remained so but for the unfortunate claims of Gracie's babies. . . .

[II]

M R. MAXWELL was so anxious to be thought not original that even when he made a remark of his own, he stressed it as though it were a quotation appearing between inverted commas: thus, "Good looks never stay at home" was his own summing-up of his four daughters' futures; though it sounded like one of those wise homely proverbs spoken to us by our nurses, who in turn have had it from their grandmothers and aunts. Gracie, Nina, Ursula and Lottie were all fairly pretty girls, though Nina's were the sort of fresh and bonny good looks that were led off by the complexion, and Gracie's depended upon the weight and length of her straight light-brown hair. It really was the sort of heavy hair which of its own accord dragged loose from its hairpins and came lolling down—a proceeding very useful to sirens and Loreleis, but a matter of catastrophe to Grace, who, a modest, sensible girl, was sure that whenever it happened, nice men would think she was encouraging them. . . .

Nevertheless, already at nineteen she was engaged to Stanley Watson; and a year later she married him.

Up till now, the Maxwells ought to have presented the appearance of just an ordinary family. Viewed as a group, they were entirely ordinary. Mr. Maxwell was a wholesale stationer, only peculiar in that

he was a thin man who behaved as though he were burly, for he was genial and boisterous and rollicking, and when he lost his temper he bellowed. As a thin man, he should have been slightly sarcastic and querulous and timid in society. But otherwise he kept strictly to precedent—he wore a gold watch-chain dragged loosely across his middle; he caught his train to the city nearly every morning, and missed it about once a week; he was proud of his sons, and kept them short of pocket-money; he loved his wife, and gave her no pocket-money at all. Oh, there was nothing *outré* about Mr. Maxwell! He was even far more polite to strangers than to his own family, and always remembered to ask Aunt Lavvy if she liked the outside piece, when he carved. “No favourites” was his motto where the children were concerned—yet Hal was the eldest son, and of this his sentimentality made great parade, treating him sonorously, as though he were the “heir” of which a great family had been anxiously expectant, to carry on the tradition and title . . . the eldest son! Hal had received no concrete privileges in the paternal will; all seven inherited exactly alike; nevertheless—the eldest son! In the bosom of abstract emotion it ranked with “God Save the King” and “Gentlemen, the Ladies!”

“Good gracious, no, my husband doesn’t want Hal to go into the business. William, our baby, is going into the business. He’s so bloomin’ steady.” It was painful when Mrs. Maxwell used words like

"bloomin'," but when she was a handsome girl she was admired for it—and habits stick. "Hal's going to the 'Varsity to read for the Law; and Bunny—no, we're afraid he'll run into debt if we send him to Oxford or Cambridge. Bunny's very wild—he's only fit for the Navy really. But my husband says it's too late, so I suppose he'll end up in the Colonies, poor old boy."

For the Maxwells were ordinary even to the possession of the usual black sheep in their midst.

To continue with the greys: after Father—but a long way after—Mother. Father and Mother still upheld each other's authority in the old perfunctory way: "You must obey your mother," "You mustn't disturb your father," . . . but they made no definite stand against the increasing freedoms and privileges of the new generation. On the whole, they were tolerant, because it was at the moment the national habit to be tolerant and not violently to enforce the precepts of right and wrong. . . .

The war was only lately over, and youth in consequence was in a state that could only be described as "difficult." Youth was touchy and arrogant, morbid and defiant . . . and even the younger members of the young generation, those who would have gone to the war if the war had lasted longer, like the Maxwells, became slightly infected by the spirit of truculence towards mere elderliness, futile, ineffective, and powerless—now.

So Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell were indulgent, because

all parents were being indulgent. And they did not know that the underneath motive was fear, because they never probed for underneath motives. And at any rate, they were safe in assuming that the children had inherited the tradition of the thoroughly commonplace, in that they were never in the least likely to do anything "different" . . . "different," in the Maxwell parlance, standing for the "wrong" of our Puritan forefathers.

Unless Bunny . . .

Bunny, aged fourteen, with dark eyes that charmed, and a wayward tuft of hair sticking out rebelliously from the crest of his head, was a perpetual anxiety. He was always in a scrape, and always created an atmosphere of apprehension that his next scrape might be very much worse. Idle, popular, daredevil Bunny . . . handsome, mischievous Bunny . . . Bunny whistling, and Bunny penitent . . . Oh, the Colonies, certainly! But meanwhile he had his place in the picture of a family group.

William idolized Bunny, and on his behalf broodingly resented Hal's superior status. A stern-eyed child, William, and persistent, fair, and with a thick stubbornness to his eyelashes which seemed the right outward expression of an equally thick stubbornness in his character. He pushed Bunny's claims whenever he could! but Hal—well, Hal was such a splendid big fellow, an athletic hero at his school, captain of the Cricket Eleven, and moderately intelligent into the bargain. And the eldest son. And everybody's

favourite, too; for although he was no beauty, with his large beaky nose and freckles, yet he had quiet pleasant ways, and an air of good-humoured and even, at times, whimsical authority . . . his sisters could not defer to him enough, especially Nina.

And they snubbed Bunny—especially Nina. She said flippantly that it was “good for his soul.” Perhaps it was! Of all the young Maxwells, Nina was the most sure of herself. She went out more than the others—perhaps this was the cause of it. For people were wont to “take her up”; especially people with no daughters of their own; richer people than the Maxwells, who lived in larger houses, and owned cars. For Nina was such a jolly girl, and so competent; not as colourless as Gracie, nor overshy and over-bold by fits and starts, like Ursula. She could cut sandwiches without spoiling the loaf, and play tennis and hockey, and drive a car, and manage sick animals; and could be useful in emergencies; and showed strong white teeth whenever she laughed—which was often—and she was never ill, and never unhappy, and “What *I* like in that girl,” said old Colonel Mathers, to sum up, “is that there’s no nonsense about her!”

A man was present when this remark was made, who gathered hostile stares by ejaculating that he could imagine nothing more ghastly and revolting —yes, he used these extreme terms—nothing more ghastly and revolting than a girl with no nonsense about her; and that the ideal girl is delicately hung

about with nonsense as a Chinese temple with tiny silver bells.

He went on for quite a long time in this vein; but as nobody argued with him, and as he was entirely wrong, and as he wasn't regularly of Buckler's Cross, but only an occasional visitor to the Mathers, his extraordinary opinions hardly mattered.

Nina had been brought up as modern public-school girls often are, to a public-school-boy cult, that despised affectation, aimed at being hard and decent and straight; to have no use for sentiment. She had an aggressive manner of addressing her younger sisters and brothers as "my good lad," "young woman," "Tuppence," "my poor brat"—(the first was usually Bunny and the last William)—but with Hal she was as bright marble changed to flowing water under the moonlight. Hal was a hero. Hal could do no wrong, or if he did (but he couldn't) it was right. By Hal, her days began and her nights ended. She wound up her watch and set the time by Hal; her rigid standards and tastes were supple as silk to defer to his. She was his trumpeter, his prophet and his slave. Triumphant, she compelled every one to own him a marvel, both for his separate acts and for his existence as a complete unit.

He really *was* quite a nice boy! Ursula and Grace and Lottie were just as fond of him as Nina, but they did not create such a dust about it. And Aunt Lavvy positively dimpled when the holidays

drew near, and said she must get out her prettiest cap, because she had a sweetheart on the seas and his ship had been sighted . . . that was Aunt Lavvy's quaint way of talking.

She told Nina that once there had been a young spark like Hal, tall and broad and with nice manners and steady grey-blue eyes—"Did he—was he—drowned, Aunt Lavvy?" in a whisper; and after a long pause—"Yes, my dear. . . ."

So Nina and Aunt Lavvy shared this secret and were great friends. But she puzzled Nina by liking Bunny too—and how could any one who saw the glory of Hal, put up with Bunny, who was always tearing about and whistling and getting into trouble and being gaily impudent to his elder sisters—"You don't know everything, Nina." "My poor lad, and you don't know anything." This was family repartee.

But Bunny had once tiptoed in to Aunt Lavvy's room when she lay in bed with a headache, and tilted the entire remains of his mother's bottle of eau-de-Cologne—borrowed for the occasion—over the sufferer's forehead and into her eyes. . . . He, too, was a dear boy. Aunt Lavvy remembered these little things.

Nina, whenever re-adopted by yet another childless couple anxious to give this bright young creature a good time, was always glad to introduce Aunt Lavvy to them on first bringing them to the Laburnums; and only regretful that she could not truth-

fully say: "This is my mother, dear Mrs. Mathers; Mother dear, this is Mrs. Mathers, who has been so kind to me——"

Why was it that Mother always had to rush away and "get dressed" at whatever hour of the day you brought in a visitor? Why couldn't she *be* dressed, like Aunt Lavvy? Why couldn't she be found in the sitting-room, cool, silvery, and with that reposedful I-and-my-Maker look about her that auræd Aunt Lavvy? instead of invariably making a hurried entrance, a gasp of words beginning with, "Oh, my dear," hands still red from recent washing, and that unfastened hook of her dress, three down from the collar-band, two up from the waist, betraying that she had dressed in too much of a hurry to summon help. And why did she wear dresses with trimming on them—half-inch trimming bought at the local draper's by the yard, with tiny beads stitched on—two or three that hung by a thread?

Aunt Lavvy, when strangers were introduced to her, always listened attentively to Nina's preliminaries. And once having got them rightly placed in her clear mind, she gave them discriminate welcome, and appropriately shaded conversation. But Mother—she just made a general rule of being kind to anybody who was kind to any of her children, not just Nina or Hal, as it ought to have been—but *any* of them! and then soused them in a wash of general conversation. . . .

After the visit, Mrs. Mathers—or her prototype—

would talk exclusively of Aunt Lavvy, how she reminded them of some one or something: "my own dear grandmother" or a miniature in the Wallace Collection, or a bit of porcelain; or a poem by "some man who always writes those sort of poems—let me see, now—who *is* it?"

"Austin Dobson," Nina supplied swiftly. But she owed that to Ursula: "A Gentlewoman of the Old School." . . . Ursula had discovered it while she had a rave on Aunt Lavvy; and the latter had been delighted.

"Listen, Aunt Lavvy—it's just like you. I found it with a lot of mess and rubbish in my Reciter's Treasury"—Miss Roberts painstakingly taught both Ursula and Lottie elocution. "Listen, Nina, doesn't it fit?

"For her, e'en Time grew debonair.
He, finding cheeks unclaimed of care,
With late-delayed faint roses there,
 And lingering dimples,
Had spared to touch the fair old face,
And only kissed with Vauxhall grace,
The soft white hand that stroked her lace,
 Or smoothed her wimples."

"And yet," Aunt Lavvy confessed, when Ursula, with a rival's triumphant glance at Nina, read aloud this strophe, "how often, when I was younger, I longed to be dashing, like your mother!"

Perhaps she had sensitively divined Nina's unspoken resentments about those exuberant dresses in

bright cloth, untidily trimmed with braid, and the top part of the bodice filled in with silk that almost matched; perhaps she guessed that Florrie Maxwell's children, her daughters anyhow, made mental comparisons . . . longed for a more dove-coloured personality in their mother. . . . At all events, her remark was a secret kindness to Florrie. . . .

"Dashing!" Ursula repeated, wide-eyed. "Is that what they'd have called Mother, then? Her own girl friends—and men? Dashing?"

"Very dashing, my dear. You should have seen her enter a ball-room!"

"Are any of us—dashing?" The word had a savour, and Ursula sniffed it up appreciatively.

"Well—Nina, perhaps, more than the rest of you."

Nina, who liked being called "a sport," was for once vexed with her beloved Aunt Lavvy for the selection. . . . "Dashing"—it sounded old-fashioned, like "The New Woman" and "bloomers." And anyway, you didn't want to be just only what your mother had been—especially if you didn't admire her.

It was in Aunt Lavvy's room that this talk took place. Presently: "I've got to go," said Ursula, abruptly ending Aunt Lavvy's reminiscences which were told in a manner whimsical, yet tinged with gentle regret, in illustration of her own foolish shyness as a girl.

"Well, go! You needn't always talk about it for an hour first."

But how should Nina remember the terrific difficulties of entrances and exits at Ursula's hoyden stage of life; how to make them graceful and yet without any gawky preliminaries . . . especially when your divinity was in the room, watching you, or understandingly not watching you. . . . It was much better when you were not romantically attached to anybody—then you just banged in and out, all anyhow—and much more successfully. Once, Nina herself was Ursula's royalty. . . . Nina at seventeen was very lovely to a small twelve-year-old sister—the careless swagger of her walk and her clear gay laugh, and her established supremacy as captain of the school games . . . white flannel shirt and loosely-knotted dark-green tie, and thick golden hair, hard-brushed to a door-knocker plait—like a well-groomed boy Nina was then, with such hard clean outlines that Ursula used to feel an ecstatic longing to follow them with the point of her finger. . . . “Dashing”—yes, it was the right word. . . . Only she could give you nothing from her cleanness and clearness—she walked right through your worship, cutting it. . . . And you began to crave for an aroma of more gracious tenderness; and there was Aunt Lavvy, ready to love you.

You had worshipped her before, of course, but not separately—just one of the cantata. But now. . . .

“You've got to tidy up for dinner, too, Nina!”

—they didn't dress for dinner at the Laburnums, unless people were invited—they "tidied up."

"You mind your own business, young woman. I don't have to scrape myself for hours with a pumice-stone!"

"Well——" Ursula still dawdled; it was hateful leaving those two alone, with Nina's air of suspended confidences. The queen dethroned and the reigning queen. . . . Ella Wheeler Wilcox. . . . "The Old Stage Queen." And then Ursula suddenly saw the humorous impossibility of Nina, broken and bowed and faded from neglect. . . .

"What's the joke?"

"There isn't one. I say—I've got to go."

"Still?"

"Oh—shut up!"

Aunt Lavvy said: "What a pity the key of our door has been lost, isn't it, Ursula? You know I always call it 'our door.' Because otherwise we might be paying calls on each other all day long." She had noticed how the child grudged the minutes spent away from her.

"Yes." Ursula was demure, but a little breathless.

After she had gone, Nina said, in the relaxed tone of one to another when a third has left the room: "How exactly alike all flappers are!"

"There's a great deal in Ursula," protested Aunt Lavvy, in affectionate championship.

"There's a great deal in every flapper," Nina declared, with a flash of observation—"too much! If Ursula played more games, she wouldn't be so rude and touchy and loving and excitable and pert and untidy and sulky——"

"Oh, Nina, Nina, what a lot of hard adjectives to pelt one little sister! Let me add a few nice ones. Ursula is honest, loyal, truthful——"

"Well, I should jolly well hope so. Hal would soon let her know about it if she wasn't. Those are just the ordinary decent things. It's not likely one would be anything else. Unless Bunny——"

"Hush!" Aunt Lavvy held up a warning finger. "Not a word against my Bunny, if you please. He may be a black, black Bunny among the white ones—but you take his scrapes too seriously, Nina darling. Try and laugh more at Bunny and Ursula—a kind laugh, not a sneering one. It's only with love and laughter that you can help them over their awkward years."

Privately, Nina thought it priggish to want to help any one with love and laughter—especially your own brothers and sisters. But as she valued Aunt Lavvy's good opinion only next to Hal's, she said nothing. And after a reflective pause, Aunt Lavvy went on:

"Though I have often——" she broke off. Then started again: "Hasn't it been rather unfair to Ursula not to send her to school, like you and Gracie? Miss Roberts is a sweet, good soul, but not exactly stimulating, is she? Sometimes, Nina—I'll confess

it to you"—and Aunt Lavvy's smile was mischievous—"I have longed for her to contradict me just once, so that I could contradict back again!"

"Poor old Gums—she is a bit flabby! But I'll tell Mother what you say about sending Ursula away to school."

In the room which was hers, adjoining Aunt Lavvy's, Ursula stood for a moment gazing hard at the locked door between; wondering for the hundredth time why, adoring Aunt Lavvy, she still kept the lost key concealed under some letters in her trinket-box.

Nina's voice, a little raised, was audible: "I'll tell Mother what you say about sending Ursula away to school."

Twang twang—deep down in Ursula's inside . . . that sick feeling of *unsafety*—treachery—Aunt Lavvy—Uriah the Hittite. . . . "Wants what I've got, so a plot to send me away."

"*Stick to what I've got.*" Ursula flung a few steps of a dance at the locked door—an impish, impudent dance.

And now she felt extraordinarily free and happy—suddenly extricated from her thick syrupy phase of Aunt-Lavvy-worship. Hitherto, she had always been dimly afraid it might grow so intense as to involve her in the final foolishness of—of finding the lost key.

[III]

IF the Maxwells had had a place in a morality drama or in "The Pilgrim's Progress," the name given them would have been Average—Mr. and Mrs. Average. . . .

Mr. Maxwell had bought the Laburnums with the two thousand pounds which had come to his wife on the death of her father. It was a large house, with plenty of rooms, but Grace and Nina and Hal were already in existence, and, as Mr. Maxwell said in his usual style of a proverb already existing: "Three's a beginning, but seven's a family"—so the largeness of the house hardly mattered. He and Florrie had the best bedroom, with dressing-room attached, and Grace and Nina shared a room, of course, and Hal slept with Nurse; and then there were a couple of spare-rooms, a tiny "landing" room, a day-nursery, and a double-fronted attic, and the servants' room. Mr. Maxwell had his study, and downstairs were the dining-room and drawing-room and Mrs. Maxwell's own sitting-room; also a small conservatory. Round the back and sides of the house was a garden that had surrendered its pleasing jungle-effect to Mr. Maxwell's persuasion, without ever quite achieving the trim cultivation that he desired. It was really just the right sort and size of house for the Maxwells, except for the discovery that it did not hold a single laburnum; but

Mr. Maxwell soon had them planted firmly on either side of the front door, because, although thin, he was a bluff man and scornful of pretension—he disapproved of his neighbour in the avenue who, never having fought in the Boer War, lived in a house called “The Kopje.” “The Kopje! Ridiculous! Ha ha.” But it never struck him that it might be as exquisitely ridiculous for a man who *had* fought in the Boer war to live in a house called “The Kopje.”

Then came Ursula, and the twin boys, Bunny and Ronald. . . . Hal into one of the spare-rooms now, and Ursula in the dressing-room off her parents’ bedroom, so that her mother could keep an eye on her while she was still small, as Nurse had as much as she could manage with the twins. Ronald died, from an attack of measles that Mrs. Maxwell refused to coddle—she was the sort of mother who wants all her youngsters to grow up sturdy, and says that measles will “do ‘em good—clear the blood . . . and it’s better for ‘em to have it now than later.” She’s a much better sort of mother than the over-anxious kind, only sometimes a child dies.

Lottie . . . and lastly, William. But in the meanwhile had occurred the financial slump, and the installation of Aunt Lavvy in the best bedroom. Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell moved into the last of the spare-rooms, Nurse had charge of the two youngest,

and Bunny shared with Hal, to his enormous contentment. The extra landing bedroom was given to them for a den to romp in.

The financial slump was over, and the Maxwells prospered, and were able to afford a governess for Ursula and Bunny—young ruffians of seven and five. She slept in the attic, converted into a bedroom of romantic views and skylights and sloping murky caves quite unappreciated by Miss Roberts, who nevertheless protested with smiling gums that she would be “perfectly comfortable up here, thank you, Mrs. Maxwell. I couldn’t ask for anything nicer.” Aunt Lavvy remained as a presence of tranquil sunshine in the house, and the sum she paid for her board and lodging was so unobtrusive as to be practically invisible. But the pressure on space was beginning to be felt, and once or twice Mrs. Maxwell suggested moving. But her husband refused: “Clover’s not for the rover,” he said. He also said that he wanted the kiddies to think of the Laburnums as “home.” His real reason was a subconscious terror of change, a diffident fear of not being able to cope successfully with innovation—he always had an underneath reason he knew very little about, to correspond with every reason of which he was definitely aware. So had his wife. And, directly they were old enough, so had Grace, Nina, Hal, Ursula, Bunny and Lottie. Not William. William had only one layer of thoughts—a good stolid layer with plenty of wear in it.

Certainly, a change of residence did involve possible readjustments of habit, and so of thought: the dining-room window might be placed differently; their chairs at table might be altered round; and if the station were nearer, he might not be obliged to start till twenty-five to nine instead of twenty past eight, and that would throw the whole day out of gear. . . . And if they left Buckler's Cross, the face of the new ticket-collector would be unfamiliar; and he would not know at first what time the post went out. . . .

So they stayed at the Laburnums: They had got used to the house, and a little squashing was nothing to make a fuss about.

When Grace, at nineteen, married Stanley Watson, any of the family who minded congestion might have drawn a tentative breath in anticipation of relief in the removal of even one of their number. But Watson was a careful young man, and suggested to his pending father-in-law that he did not care to enshrine Grace in a home till he could afford one that was worthy of her. He was saving up for it; but he desired all sorts of extras in decoration and furnishing which he dragged from obscure volumes in the British Museum. He was a Profound Reader. Grace would have been contented with domesticity on a much cosier plane—she was the “domestic one,” as Nina was the “popular one,” Ursula the “beautiful one” (rather doubtfully, because the critic who had publicly pro-

nounced this decision had a different standard of beauty from the Maxwells) and Lottie the "helpful one," rather on the same lines as Grace, but with more initiative; she was fond of preparing "little surprises" for her family, such as drawers tidied, or a pincushion restocked; and when these were discovered, she slipped unobtrusively away to avoid thanks. But Stanley, tenderly, refused to budge an inch: "No shoddy imitation panelling for *you*, Graciewigs—not *good* enough. I'll have it done after the Monastery in Gewitterburg, destroyed by the invading hordes of Gustavus Adolphus during the Thirty Years' War. What a horrible loss"—thickly; Stanley was spasmodically rather thick in his speech, but his ideals were conscientiously pellucid.

"We can't be mean, Will; he's offered to pay, and it's only for a short while," argued Mrs. Maxwell with her husband—also a careful man.

So another bedroom had to be snatched from the living-room area; Mrs. Maxwell's sitting-room was converted into a bedroom for Stanley and Grace—"You never use it much, Florrie; and after all, the whole house belongs to you," said Mr. Maxwell, being generous.

A year later, Lottie went up to destroy Miss Roberts' attic solitude; and William, who would have liked the attic, had a bed in the room which Hal and Bunny used to look on as their "den"; during the day, they insisted it was still their den, which was very upsetting to the orderly soul of

William. For the night-nursery and Nurse herself were appropriated—"only temporarily, of course," for Gracie's first baby. The second followed two years later . . . and it was very fortunate that Ursula and Lottie would soon have no more need of the schoolroom, because then it could revert to its original state of day-nursery; meanwhile, it was day-nursery or schoolroom, according to the party at the moment in possession. Nurse and Miss Roberts were quite polite to each other, and even treated the rival claim with deference.

The eye of an efficient organizer would have no doubt noted that the marriage of Grace had left Nina with a good-sized double bedroom, undisputed. Obviously, there was room for either Ursula or Lottie with her. And it seemed irrelevant, too, that Ursula's bedroom should be adjacent to Aunt Lavvy's; the three boys, Hal, Bunny and William, could have shared the attic, and revelled in it—attics are suitable things for boys. Then their "den," which was also William's room, could have been Miss Roberts' private bedroom, always presuming that governesses have need of privacy, and that Lottie slept with Nina. An alternative grouping would have been Nina and Ursula to share Nina's room; Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell to have retained their own bedroom, with the room leading out of it to replace Mrs. Maxwell's sitting-room; the latter to be Aunt Lavvy's bedroom, with Grace and Stanley in the spare-room.

And the most normal and convenient solution would have eliminated Aunt Lavvy, and sent Grace and Stanley and their paraphernalia of Nurse and babies, to a home of their own.

But the existing arrangement was not one instantaneous and successful reconstruction after one instantaneous cataclysm; but the result of gradual changes, haphazard shifts and displacements . . . and it built itself up on the assumption that nobody minded anything, and that, in the Maxwell scheme of things, a sense of property in space simply did not exist. As long as chaos was bound about by four outer walls of home, the squanderings and overlappings within did not matter. Almost every room had its double uses, except Father's study, which alone remained aloof from any sudden bewitchment or transformation. Father did not study, but he had to have his study, because he was Father. . . . It was sacred ground—and if not held sacred, profane. But the drawing-room, which also held the telephone and the piano, was common ground for all, as well as cold storage for unwanted callers. Stanley, in the evenings, conducted his "researches" in the dining-room; Ursula and Lottie had their morning lessons in the nursery, while the babies were out; Hal and Bunny developed photographs in William's bedroom. When Nina was away visiting, they temporarily turned her bedroom into a guest-room. Mrs. Maxwell, of course, had the whole house.

Had the Laburnums a personality and a life of its own, you can imagine it with adenoids, and breathing heavily from the chest—that laboured bronchial breathing which forebodes trouble. . . .

[IV]

AFTER Hal had gone out with Aunt Lavvy's cheque, the house and garden became slumbrous. . . . It was September, that mercurial month of the year which at one moment raises a sigh for fires in the listless grates, and at one moment is rich with excitement of high winds and burning blue skies, and boughs that with every creak and sway fling treasure to the ground.

But today the air was grey and melancholy; the leaves were yellow and brown, without flame or gesture. Presently it began to rain. Miss Roberts, superintending Ursula's Shakespeare hour, and Lottie's French, in the pseudo-schoolroom, shivered a little, and corrected a rebellious thought by a dutiful amendment of how right it was of her employer not to sanction fires before October the first: "Young folk carry their fires inside 'em," he said.

"Bijou, caillou, chou, genou, hibou, joujou, pou," recited Lottie with fluency, and waited for praise.

"Well, dear?" Miss Roberts waited expectantly.

"Are the only nouns that take 'x' in the plural, or else the only ones that don't; I'm not sure."

"But you *ought* to be sure, Lottie. Suppose you were in France, and had to ask for any of those things in a great hurry."

"I don't think she's likely to," Ursula argued staidly. "Jewels, pebbles, cabbage, knees——" She burst out laughing. "Fancy wanting knees in a hurry in France—or owls!"

Lottie began to giggle, too; and Miss Roberts, feeling that there was something vaguely indecent about knees—in France—changed the subject.

"It's raining. I expect it will be too cold for Nurse to stop out with the babies. So we'd better hurry up." She took the Macbeth, with its copious notes, from Ursula's hands, and began to question her from the glossary:

"'Paddock,' a toad. Lily-livered means cowardly. Marry—a corruption of the Virgin Mary, a slight oath. Moe—more. Sinel was the Earl of Northumberland."

"No, no, Ursula. That's *Siward*. Sinel . . . think now."

Ursula shook her head.

"Macbeth's father, according to Holinshed," Miss Roberts quoted triumphantly from the book.

"Well, anyway, he doesn't come into the play; and Shakespeare wrote it, not Holinshed, so——"

"Posset"? questioned Miss Roberts patiently. She knew that Ursula in these silly exasperating moods, when she questioned everything, must simply not be encouraged.

"Posset is hot milk poured on ale or sack, having sugar, grated biscuit, and eggs, with other ingredients boiled in it, which goes all to a curd. . . ." The girl's eyes grew dreamy, as they watched the nipping of the rain beyond the window. . . . Posset—to sip in front of the fire in solitary warmth and flickering half-lights. . . . "Posset" one should drink alone, always; wassail in company. Should she make festival out of the day, and light her first fire, after lessons, up in her room? Or else wait a bit longer, tantalize herself with the promise of a yet colder, drearier morning? How the others had ragged her when she asked for five hundredweight of coal as a birthday present from her parents. "*Private* coal . . . to use in my room. . . . I could clear out the little cupboard under the stairs just outside, and keep it there . . ." stammering, wildly eager—they had asked her to name what she most wanted . . . why should she ask for a wrist-watch or a new tennis racquet or a book, because these were things they thought she ought to want most? Ursula enjoyed nonchalantly telling people that she hated reading—they were always so shocked: "When I was your age, I was a regular bookworm." There were only two sorts of books you got as presents—the first kind had a lot of gold and bright colour on the outside, and was the story of the favourite of the school, who was also the leader in all the scrapes, so impulsive and warm-hearted that even the head-

mistress could not help smiling indulgently at her; or else a classic suitable for her age: "Villette," or "The Cloister and the Hearth," or "Adam Bede," or "Pride and Prejudice," and Dickens and Scott, of course, bound in calf or suède, with thin leaves and gilt edges.

The first kind wasn't bad when you were Lottie's age. The second were just bores.

For not one of Mr. Maxwell's children was of that well-known exceptional type who steal unobserved into the study and rummage among the shelves, and one day light by chance on Gibbon or Swinburne, and become absorbed . . . and are never the same afterwards.

Books help to furnish a room, undeniably; but otherwise—"the Maxwells do not read" . . . It never occurred to them. But they gave books as presents.

"Are you sure, Ursula, you wouldn't rather
—?"

A tentative, slant-wise look, first at her mother, then at her father. . . . "I'd much rather have fires of my own, please."

Yes, she knew she could get warm at the drawing-room fire whenever she wanted to, but that was everybody's fire; and the schoolroom fire still belonged to Nurse; she dried the babies' washing on the high wire guard, so that there was always that steamy stuffy smell. . . . And the kitchen fire was only to cook by, and—and—

"Bedroom fires are a luxury, Ursula—you know that."

"Not if it was a *birthday* present"—how unfair, to call it a birthday present, rightfully due, and in addition to censure it as a luxury. They wouldn't have called a new tennis racquet a luxury every time she played with it. . . . Oh, didn't they—couldn't they—see?

They ceded her the five hundredweight of coal, but tempered the generosity by making "Ursula's coal" the current family joke. Hal, with a great shout of laughter, suggested a poker as his birthday present—and was surprised when the offer was promptly accepted. Up came William and Lottie, then, on the morning of October the fourteenth, with two dozen penny bundles of sticks—their gift! Would she deign to accept it? Ursula was very grateful. After that, of course, everything in existence was offered her for her fire, from an empty reel of cotton to a broken umbrella. Bunny pretended to be in awe of his sister, as a fire-worshipper, and read up their rites and practices in the Encyclopædia in order to taunt her with them at the public table. Also he would ask her every breakfast-time if she had counted her five hundred-weight, insisting that he had heard a burglar stealing along her passage during the night—"And you bet he was after a lump of your coal, Ursula!"

Grace wondered if it was quite safe: "Ursula's

such a scatter-brain. She might easily go to sleep and leave it burning, mightn't she?" thinking of her two babies in the house. And Nina, by calling her "Cinders," imagined she had thus said the final word on the matter.

But: "My own room and my own fire"—the last word was surely with Ursula. To be able to choose the mood and the moment for a fire; to say: "Now—and exactly now" without waiting for a grown-up to order it and a servant to light it; to be its supreme mistress, poke it when she pleased, draw her small basket-work armchair as near as she wanted it, dole out her coal, so that each piece should yield its utmost; and when it sank to a luminous twitching landscape of caves and archways, then to pull the faded red-serge curtains across her window, still with that consciously imperious feeling, tuck the four walls of her room warmly around her, and the dim ceiling with its waves of orange reflected above the fireplace, and the boarded floor. . . . Then—just to sit there and exult! Exult *at* something . . . the bumping, congested, ricochetting life in the rest of the house, perhaps—"like billiard-balls making cannons all the time," Ursula once phrased it to herself.

She forgot these ecstasies of mutinous solitude when she was downstairs, playing an eager set of tennis with Hal or Nina, getting into scrapes with Bunny, or simply joining in the habit of general ragging or bickering which occurred regularly four

times a day round a table, and which was the only up-to-date presentment of what was still symbolically known as "family life." "Family life" occurred at meal-times, but otherwise, and as a social force, it was not in a robust condition. Each member of the large household led a curiously detached life; they saw so much of each other that they never bothered to talk; they knew so much of each other's corporeal presence, that the spirit was taken for granted. Besides this, there was the tradition of rudeness and snubs between brothers and sisters, which it would have been bad form to violate. Familiarity breeds, not contempt, but strangeness. Thus Bunny never thought of beginning a long pally intimate talk with Ursula or Hal—he saw them both all day and every day; Nina, though she was a fanatic on the subject of Hal's perfections, knew nothing whatever about his mental life; and carried all her own revelations of a private Nina well away from the Laburnums—to Mrs. Mather, say; or to Mary Cliffe, who understood her so well. Hal had his school-friends; Mrs. Maxwell her Buckler's Cross ladies; Mr. Maxwell his city cronies; Ursula her room; William his neat collections of whatever was collectable, and an odd liking for snatched half-hours with Nurse, when he talked rather slowly and ponderously of his ambitions and general outlook and the injustices meted out to Bunny, and she said at intervals:

"Nonsense, Master William—I don't believe half you say, and you're in my light"; Miss Roberts her diary—yes, bless her, she wrote a diary, and kept her soul, such meagre allowance of it as she was able to save from the day's propinquities, tightly pressed between the leaves; Lottie walked arm-in-arm with other ten-year-olds, and invited them to tea and giggled confidentially with them in corners of the garden. . . .

But it was a queer arrangement, although so commonplace that no one stopped to think it queer—all these people tightly jammed together, and knowing no more of each other than was visible to the eye.

Aunt Lavvy, perhaps, was deposit for the biggest proportion of real Nina, real Bunny and Hal and Grace and Ursula. But Aunt Lavvy had quaint ways which always brought out the best in all of them—a best that they were wont to leave behind with her when they carried their grubbier loads of humannesses elsewhere; they knew they could as securely count on finding it again whenever they might want it, as though Aunt Lavvy were the cloakroom in a large station.

. . . "Posset"—it ought to be brought in by an old woman, plump and garrulous, with rosy dimpling cheeks, wearing one of those two-horned head arrangements with folds of drapery round the chin—"Thank you, good Dame," or—"Good my

Nurse"—What a pity Nurse wasn't either the Shakespeare or the historical kind—she had such a sharp bony little face and thin hair, and wore round hard hats when she took the babies out, instead of bonnets, so that she never looked cosily ancient. . . .

The rain spattered impatiently at the window, but Ursula decided nevertheless not to light her first fire that morning. After tea was best—it would give her time to feel thoroughly chilled and forlorn, so as to make it more worth while; and the weather might get stormier, too, by tonight—the Equinoctial Gales—they came in September—or was it the Gulf Stream? No good to ask Miss Roberts; she'd presume on the fact that you had asked an intelligent question, to tell you much more than you ever wanted to hear about either. . . . And she'd look it up in the physical geography books, and some time next week: "By the way, Ursula, you were asking me about the Gulf Stream—" in her high, bright, perpetually-interested voice—long after you'd forgotten there was such a thing! Poor old Gums. . . . She was one of those who strove to make lessons as good as play—

A shuffling and chattering beyond the door, and Nurse came in, carrying Baby. A very pink and burbly child with scanty fair hair, replica of Stanley Watson, and Rossettishly called by him Honor Rose, clutched stumblingly at her hand. "Give over now, Rosie!"

At once, Miss Roberts began to gather up books and rulers and pens, with an air of great energy: "All right, Nurse, we're just off; give us half a minute, and you'll see the last of us——"

"There ain't no call to hurry, Miss Roberts, if you've not done yet"—baby mysteriously upside down already, and Nurse with her mouth full of safety-pins; "I couldn't very well keep them out in the rain till twelve o'clock——"

"No, no, of course not——"

"But you don't disturb me if I don't disturb you, and if you don't mind my sewin'-machine presently." She set baby upright again, with a little shake.

"But indeed, we can get on quite well in the dining-room——"

"It's not cleared from breakfast yet. I noticed as I came in. That Minnie is a lazy fat thing——"

Miss Roberts gathered up the last of the schoolroom into her arms, signed to Ursula to take the inkpot, and to Lottie to put the chairs back, and prepared to leave the nursery with a touch of pleasant dignity—"because really I could hardly let myself be drawn into a discussion with Nurse about the other servants——"

". . . Such a pity your walk was spoilt! Was Rosie a good little girl?—but I always think that September—Ursula, you've forgotten your compasses—No trouble at all to move, really——"

"Good is as good goes," Nurse replied

cryptically. "Neither of them is a patch on Master Hal and Master William—and *they* were nothing much, neither!" hastily, to impress Lottie and Ursula with her complete detachment from an attitude of faithful devotion . . . and Ursula thought regretfully of Good-my-Nurse and her Posset. "Well, if you won't stay, don't, but then don't say I'm drivin' you out of the room, because you're welcome enough."

"No, indeed, I'm sure it's a great deal more your little kingdom than ours."

"It was your schoolroom before it was my nursery," Nurse argued against herself, struggling to maintain her part in the atmosphere of mutual courtesy. "But then, again, it was my nursery before it was ever your schoolroom, too, so——"

Baby began to roar; and Miss Roberts, still in an affable state of thanks, departed with Ursula and Lottie.

Lessons were continued in the drawing-room. Aunt Lavvy sat with the paper in the armchair near the window; Mrs. Maxwell bustled in and out, and Lottie practised at the piano, with a metronome; while Ursula, who was rather good at mathematics, evilly pretended that she could not understand why the right angle A B C *must* be equal to the right angle X Y Z, because Miss Roberts so obviously did not understand why, either. Lottie was always "especially nice" to Miss Roberts; for Grace had explained to her that one ought to be nice to depen-

dants; but Ursula had portions of conscience strangely undeveloped. At her very best, she was never so considerate as Grace and Lottie, nor so thoroughly decent as Nina. And Gums exasperated her by always proving softer material than the substance against which she was thrown.

"Don't be rude to your inferiors, kid—'tisn't sporting," Nina bluntly told her, after overhearing a skirmish.

"It makes them feel their position so terribly," said Grace more kindly.

"I'm rude to everybody else, so if I stopped being rude to just Miss Roberts, it ought to make her feel her position ever so much more."

"It ought to, but it wouldn't, because she's got no brains," Bunny demolished Ursula's not unskilful defence.

"Then she oughtn't to be our governess."

"You'd get 'em just as soft at school. One of our chaps——" Bunny told the anecdote, with himself quite well-placed as a picturesque centre. "If you've got real brains you don't teach, because it makes you too sick having to listen to the duds."

"What costly rot you talk, Bunny. I suppose that's just because it makes them sick at Winborough having to teach *you*——"

This was just family repartee; and "costly," imported by Hal as the latest Winborough fashion, successor to "posh" and "nimble," could be applied almost anywhere in conversation. Stanley Watson

tried to squash it by a quality of bluff humorous pedantry, which he used rather successfully—he thought—to conceal his very real pain at the way the English language was perverted and constricted by the young Maxwells; and his equally real suspicion that Hal's attitude towards himself was more amused than respectful. And indeed, there was something about Stanley's personality which was a perpetual twitch to Hal's funny-bone. Stanley liked being humorous, but resented being funny; he made infamous puns which he knew would provoke groans from the entire family; but only Hal perceived that Stanley felt the groans were additionally to his credit—it was manly to be groaned at. When his eldest daughter was brought in to say good-bye to her parents and grand-parents before going ta-ta on a Sunday morning, Stanley said things like: "Hello! When is a bonnet not a bonnet? When it's Honor Rose (on a rose)," in a deep thick voice that obviously found the passage down his nose almost impregnable. And then a ruminative twinkle might be seen in Hal's eyes, whenever he was present; a twinkle that said: "*Watson is such a costly ass!*"

But if Stanley humorous was funny, Stanley's serious side was funnier still—to Hal. Grace thought, as was right and fitting she should, that Stanley had a fine character; for instance, he went regularly every Wednesday evening to play dominoes with a bedridden Boer-War veteran—"whose only pleasure it was." "Whose only pleasure it was"

must have been Gracie's phrase, because Stanley never mentioned his little errand of quiet charity; slipped off very unobtrusively on Wednesdays; and when afterwards greeted by a forgetful: "Where have you been?" said: "Oh, just out . . ." and quickly turned the subject, conveying the reproof: "If one can't do a thing like that for a fellow human being without bragging about it——"

"But he never misses a Wednesday—" Grace again —"however tired he is."

It was Hal's ignoble ambition to see him miss a Wednesday. "Because if only he missed just one, the poor old chap, What's-his-name, could at least *hope* he'd miss another. . . ."

Hal was a nice lad, in spite of the position of exalted lordliness he occupied in the eyes of the household—not forgetting to except Stanley and William. He taught his younger brothers and sisters their place, but not unkindly; he did not talk as eternally of cricket as might have been expected of the captain of the Winborough first eleven, because he did not talk very much at all—it wasn't done, unless you were a costly gas-bag like Bunny. He ragged Stanley and teased Miss Roberts, and was uncommunicative with his father, like all glorious young heroes of seventeen-and-a-half. His principal occupation was, in the holidays, lounging past the doctor's house, in a rough greeny-grey tweed coat, on the chance that either of the doctor's two daughters, Maisie or Dorothy, might be coming out. They were

both pretty, and he was quite impartial in his flirting; the latter process only meant a saunter beside one or the other while he described how he would give her tea in his own rooms at college next year, or "quite a costly hop old Dick Fraser lugged me to, night before last. Wish you'd been there, though." Hal was especially good-natured when people were in trouble—they had to be in real trouble, not just miserable. He let his mother kiss him, whenever she really felt like it; and made his acolyte, Nina, very happy by the simple process of always finding her plenty of work to do in his service; she knitted ties and socks for him, bought his presents for other people, and kept other people well-informed as to the exact shade of his own desires in the way of presents; kept his tennis racquet in its press, and Bunny well aware of his lowness. What more could a sister do?

Hal was without question the most masculine element at the Laburnums—excepting a back-view of William, broad and stolid, bending over a pit that he was digging at the far end of the garden, where the shrubbery degenerated into a mere tangle of shrubs. This pit was one of seven, and when asked what they represented, William said, "Earth-works"; and, if further pressed as to why he dug them—"Because I want to," after a moment's quiet and conscientious reflection.

Neither Mr. Maxwell nor Stanley Watson, however, was as casually masculine as Hal, because

they were more preoccupied with manliness. And Bunny— “Oh, Bunny’s like a girl,” said Nina, “he shows off!”” Bunny was sensitive, too, in addition to all his other palpable faults.

[V]

THE inferior son of the Maxwells was wretchedly throwing a ball against the side of the house, on the same morning that Hal went on Aunt Lavvy’s errand, and the Watson babies drove Miss Roberts and her pupils into the drawing-room. He was remembering with apprehension a large and cleverly comical caricature which he had executed in brushwork on the inside of the lid of his late form-master’s desk, representing that gentleman himself saying waggishly: “Believe me, my boy, this is going to hurt you much more than it hurts me!”—a perversion of the popular sentiment which he had picked up from one of Saki’s books, and which he used “at least three hundred and sixty-four times a year more than it was funny!” as Bunny savagely put it. But Bunny’s report had revealed, when his father opened it, that his late form-master was not going to be late at all—in fact, that Bunny had not got his remove; which was quite bad enough in itself without the additional trouble of the caricature which would be discovered in Bunny’s presence on the first day of the coming term. And then there was the matter of the unpaid tuck-

shop bill, which the proprietor had threatened to send in to Mr. Maxwell unless settled by the end of the holidays.

Bunny for the moment did not feel at all handsome and dare-devil, which was how he best liked to see himself—not discouraged by the fact that the best sort of boy does not possess the faculty for seeing himself in any guise. One of Hal's favourite stories against his younger brother related how Bunny, hopping pyjamaed round their bedroom one evening, paused in his carol of sheer *joie de vivre* to say with simple sincerity: “Aren’t I lucky? I’m good-looking, brilliant, athletic—I can draw and swim and jump better than any other chap; I’m popular and brave——”

For weeks, the entrance of Bunny was the signal for a concerted roar of “Aren’t I lucky?” from his brothers and sisters; till superseded by the joke of Ursula and her coals.

Anyway, Hal was a good chap, and did not pass on the tale at Winborough. Hal *was* a good chap . . . would it be any consolation to pour out all the mess to him? Not that he could help, but Bunny was one of those who find relief in merely unburdening themselves. Only, although Hal listened with his rough fair eyebrows drawn critically together over his beaky nose, and then summed up and gave shrewd advice, semi-humorous but never didactic, Bunny, being sensitive, could not help feeling that Hal’s natural reticence was silently longing for

equal reticence in Bunny; and that he was always apprehensive of an unburdening that would go beyond decency. . . .

Perhaps Aunt Lavvy, of more porous material, might be a better selection for his present confidences. Yes, a fellow might go to Aunt Lavvy tonight after tea, when her room was genial with soft lamplight from behind the delicate pinky silk shade, and seductive with favouritism. . . . "I believe she likes me best of all, right enough!"

Grace would say that of course Aunt Lavvy loved them all alike. Grace was a fathead . . . she talked of loving people alike as though it were a merit.

And Nina would say——,

"Oh, *sisters!*" Bunny, wet through with the drizzling rain, and thoroughly exasperated with things in general, tried to hurl his ball neatly into the open aperture of Nina's window. It entered the room, certainly, but through the lower pane, not over it. "Damnation!" Bunny ran quickly into the house to recover his property. Once in the girls' room, as it was still called, though Gracie had departed, he regretted that he had not brought up a fat toad he had noticed hopping in the mush of wet leaves outside, and promptly made an extra journey downstairs to fetch it. The room annoyed him with its spruce impersonal air, Nina's cups and hockey-group photographs ranged all along the mantelpiece, as though she were a boy—as though she were Hal.

"I do hope no rotten man will ever make old Nina still more pleased with herself by getting struck on her!"—with an apprehension of the awful calamity this would be.

Bunny was quite busy and happy settling the toad in a temporary paradise of Nina's wash-basin full to the brim with water, lifted unsteadily and set upon the carpet . . . a surrounding tent of sheets pulled from Nina's bed and draped over chairs and a tripod of golf-clubs.

Gradually, from a mischievous schoolboy, he was metamorphosed into a child again, by the unfailing fun of building up things with any odd material at hand into an erection for which they were not intended . . . a child absorbed and solemn, breathing rather hard, dark rings of hair fallen over his forehead . . . a crooning commentary on his own action forming at last into a little song. "That's right, tie them together. . . . Hi, young Toad, you stop where you are . . . this is *home* in the basin. I'll get you some mud presently . . . here's the other sheet . . . peg it down—shall I leave an archway? . . . he'll get out, though—books so that they don't blow up from the floor . . . that's splendid. . . . The Toaderies. . . . Paint the sheets blue so that he thinks it's the sky above him . . . ink would do . . . night sky. . . . Bother! it's slipped again. . . . Where did I put that string? . . . a cave of broken flowerpots. . . ."

"*Bunny!*"

He came up with a drowned expression—the miscellaneous heap built up on the carpet of Nina's room slipped away from the illusion of under-the-sea grottos of which he had been inspired architect, and was merely silliness—he waited for Nina to say so, knowing there was no escape. . . . Why had he lugged in that old toad? It was not even as though Nina were afraid of them; then, there would have been some sense in it. If Nina had been a proper girl——

Sullenly, Bunny rose to his feet: "All right, I'll clear it all up," he said, hoping she would think he had used her possessions in wanton and destructive mischief, and not as it had really been, because for the past seven years he had been groping for his bricks. . . .

"Is this your brother? I seem to remember him much bigger and fairer," said the lady with whom Nina had just been spending the week-end, and who had accompanied her home. Mrs. Tom Fraser had been pretty once, but her tendency to fat had concentrated in the neighbourhood of her chins, so that her round little features looked as though they had been pushed upwards into a space much too small for them.

"You're thinking of Hal," said Nina, in a tone to correspond. "I'm sorry about this mess, Lill; come down into the drawing-room and see Aunt Lavvy—and I'll speak to you later, young man!" Nina was very brightly flushed with the effort to

keep her temper, and not betray the presence of the toad to Mrs. Fraser, who was short-sighted. She had quite a fondness for toads herself, but Lill would certainly have screamed.

Down in the drawing-room, she was soothed to find Aunt Lavvy and Hal, tempered by the less satisfactory presence of Miss Roberts and Ursula doing mathematics, and Lottie still practising with the metronome.

"Miss Roberts, do you think we might be very kind to Lottie, and give her ten minutes holiday?" asked Aunt Lavvy pleasantly, as soon as she grasped the identity of Mrs. Fraser.

"Mother," Nina mentally worked out the usual table of contrasts, "would have apologized twenty times for the drawing-room being used as a schoolroom just today; and then she'd have explained all about Minnie not clearing the breakfast-table, and Gracie's babies in the schoolroom, but Stanley hoped soon to find the house he wanted—and if she had known Lill was coming, etc.—all without stopping Lottie."

That nicely-behaved child, in the meantime, had drawn a chair for Mrs. Fraser close up to Aunt Lavvy's, and had brought her a footstool and a cushion, with the solicitude for old age which she bestowed upon every one over thirty. Then she trotted out of the room, realizing that one less of a crowd was desirable when visitors were present. If it had been afternoon, she would have left a message

in the kitchen that there was one extra for tea. As it was, her period of urgent usefulness at an end, she drifted into Nina's room to see if The Cup needed polishing; and was there ardently welcomed by Bunny, toiling to drag the sheets back to their former neatness over the bed.

"Here—catch hold!"

"Oh, Bunny, are you in a scrape *again?*"

Bunny laughed, and shook back his hair. "Oh, one more or less—" he boasted. "The sooner I come to a bad end, as old Nina puts it, the better! Then you'll all stop waiting about for it! Think of me, Lottie, in convict's garb, coming wearily home after twenty years' hard, and leaning over the churchyard wall and counting your graves, and wishing I'd been a better brother and a better son—" Bunny acted the part with gusto, and collapsed into silent sobs with his arms on the bed-rail.

"You wouldn't be wearing convict's garb after they'd let you out," Lottie, unimpressed by the pantomime, corrected him. "And there's no reason why we should all be in our churchyard graves in twenty years. Unless, of course, there's been an epidemic," she added, after a moment's careful thought.

Bunny started at her, and said from the fulness of his heart: "What a beastly little whelp you are!"

"Oh, Bunny, when I'm helping you!"

And he wondered, as so many of his sex have

wondered before him, why just *his* sisters should be devoid of beauty, charm, intelligence, humour and all generosity of spirit.

Down in the sitting-room, the telephone-bell rang, interrupting a pleasant conversation in which Nina, Hal and Mrs. Fraser described the latest tango fox-trot step to Aunt Lavvy.

"Hello—hello—yes?—Oh certainly. Wait a minute." Nina laid down the receiver—"It's for you, Aunt Lavvy."

Hal and Mrs. Fraser, both keen dancers, lowered their voices and went on talking about the Revolving Bellows step. Mrs. Maxwell, who from upstairs had heard the telephone and thought it must be for her—most people who are at all psychic seem to catch this urgent personal note in the bell—rushed into the room, but was checked to find Aunt Lavvy at the receiver, and a visitor present: Mrs. Fraser, whom she hardly knew, but who was always so kind to Nina. She began to tell her so, with effusion, but was hushed by Nina, because Aunt Lavvy had looked round from the 'phone with a little appealing smile which meant, "Please, I can't hear a word."

"Yes?—Yes, it is. Platt's Bank—this morning, yes.—Indeed, I remember, I received them not half an hour ago.—Oh, I am sorry; how very annoying for you, but—of course I will look, just one minute." Aunt Lavvy turned round again to

the room at large: "Nina darling, will you bring me my little bag. There it is, lying on the chair. The clerk at Platt's has just found out he has given somebody an extra pound note by mistake this morning, and it may quite well be——" she drew out a little packet and counted "One, two, three, four, five——no, there are only five; I'll just turn the bag out, in case——reticule is the word to use at my age, isn't it, Mrs. Fraser? A dear old-fashioned word. . . . Only five treasury-notes, and the half-crown and sixpence I had before——thank you, Nina. Hello——"

Mrs. Maxwell had an irritating habit, when any member of the household was talking on the phone, of offering suggestions and making amendments to their remarks, during the pauses while the person at the other end was speaking. She did so now:

"Tell him the numbers, Lavvy—that may help him—it always helps 'em to know the numbers. And say they're clean ones. That makes a difference, because the clean ones don't stick so, greasy things some of them are, disgraceful, I always say——"

"*Mother!*!" Ursula now, answering the appeal in Nina's eyes. Nina did not want to be heard by Lill Fraser rebuking her mother twice running; but it was so awfully ill-bred, the oblivious way she ran on and on.

"Hello. No. I am so sorry for your trouble,

but there has been no mistake. I counted them, only five—and my cheque was for five pounds. . . . Yes, Mr. Hal Maxwell brought them. I had asked him to cash the cheque for me. . . . Yes, he's here. . . . With pleasure—it is just possible—”

“Turn your pockets out, Hal,” laughed Nina. “You're under a cloud.”

But Aunt Lavvy's serene face was slightly disturbed as once again she turned round.

“Hal dear, would you mind making quite sure that you have not a hole in your pocket, or a Bradbury sticking between the coat and the lining . . . something like that. The young man is so persistent. It is foolish of me, but any trouble with the bank always makes me uneasy, especially when we know Mr. Fennimore so well.”

“This wasn't old Fennimore himself though—it was the man he always sends over for this branch.” Hal was rummaging energetically in his pockets. “Hullo, here's—no, it's only an old letter.” One that Dorothy had written him. He was slightly flushed as he crumpled it back into his pocket. “Sorry, Aunt Lavvy, no luck.”

“I'm afraid we can't help you to put your mistake right. Neither I nor Mr. Hal Maxwell have got the extra pound note,” said Aunt Lavvy into the mouth-piece. She emphasized her words with rather more bell-like precision than usual, and replaced the receiver with a sharp little click. Mrs. Maxwell let

slip the bonds from her checked rush of indignation.

"Really, Lavvy, I don't wonder you're annoyed. It's as though they suspected you, ringing up like that. Really, I wonder you were so polite, considering it was their own carelessness. And when we've invited Mr. Fennimore to supper tomorrow—I'm sorry I told Tom sherry as well as port. Well, it's very unpleasant. Let's talk about something else. How do you like your new house, Mrs. Fraser?" The conversation, thus manipulated, creaked protestingly at the lack of skill. "So jolly sporting of you to put up with Nina."

"If only Mother wouldn't use slang," groaned Nina to herself; and Aunt Lavvy, more discriminating, thought: "If only poor Florrie didn't try to please Nina by using slang."

"It's not a house, you know, Mrs. Maxwell. Nor even a flat, exactly. They call it a studio flat. And we found we actually have a wee musicians' gallery on the premises—or rather a gallery without the musicians. Isn't it quaint?"

"It would be much quainter if you found you had the musicians on the premises without the gallery," said Ursula, bending over her sums, at the table; she had no right at all to be aware of the social entertainment part of the room; still less to enter into it. It sounded quite gracefully witty in her mind before she actually said it, but directly it was out, she knew it was a failure. It fell into the web of conversation, parting it, instead of drawing it together by tiny

silken stitches. . . . Ursula sat with her head bent and eyelids lowered, while the hot scarlet shame dragged up over her neck. She was conscious of Nina's astonished disapproval, of Mrs. Fraser's perfunctory little laugh, of Gums preparing a tactless reproof. But most of all, she was conscious of having been merely clumsy where she had hoped to be effective.

"Can't Ursula do her lessons—her studies—in the dining-room yet, Miss Roberts? They must have cleared away by now. Why, it's nearly lunch-time."

Whereupon Mrs. Fraser naturally said she must go home. And Mrs. Maxwell naturally tried to amend her blunder by inviting her to lunch. And Nina was apprehensive as to the quality of the lunch—quantity there always was. And Aunt Lavvy, usually to be relied upon for those deft silken stitches that were Ursula's envy, was still not quite serenely herself—it was so disconcerting to be associated, even by a few courteous questions, with financial losses and banks and defaulting clerks.

Finally, Hal saw Mrs. Fraser into her car; and then, instead of returning into the house, disappeared into the shrubbery.

[VI]

HE sat uncomfortably on a damp, tree-stump and stared at William's earth-works. Was it possible that he had kept back a one-pound

treasury bank note? Kept back—taken—stolen. . . . Rats! Of course he hadn't stolen it. Tramps stole, and burglars, and—sometimes—servants. Bank-clerks, too, occasionally. "But—but not *us*."

If he hadn't—taken—it, though . . . and here it was, folded in his coat's inner pocket—why not have produced it when Aunt Lavvy had turned round from the telephone, and said: "Hal——"? Why not have said: "Here you are, Aunt Lavvy. The chap made a mistake, and handed me out six of 'em."

It was incredible that he should have lied then. That was the real lapse. He could remember the mood in which he had—the horror deepened . . . the mood in which he had stolen the note, although it had receded to unfamiliarity.

Hal was magnificently independent of weather, and the colour of the sky and the haze of sunshine over bright September boughs, and such-like absurdities from which frailer natures weave their moods. So that he could, simply from his own fitness of body, feel with a sudden thrill of well-being that the world was an altogether costly place, as he strode along the prim tree-planted roads of Buckler's Cross on that drizzling morning of dead summer. He had often enjoyed life before, but now, for the first time, he found conscious pleasure in hauling his blessings into parade. . . .

Maisie—he had paused a moment at her gate, and watched her in the front garden, snipping the faded dahlias from their stems—a click of the

scissors, and the big clumsy bloom toppled heavily sideways. The rain filmed her long ragged black hair, and glittered in tiny points as she bent and rose again. What a small head she had. If someone were to snick it off, how lightly it would fall among the roots of the Michaelmas daisies. Her old jersey was the same bluish tint as her eyes——

He did not stop to hail her cheerily, but walked quickly on. And he thought of her quite separately from Dorothy—which was a distinct advance.

Footer next term. And the following October, Oxford. Oh—*costly!* Maisie—in a punt . . . having tea in his rooms . . . old Nina would fix it. He'd begin to collect stuff for his rooms at Christmas.

Perhaps the pond would freeze this Christmas. If so—skating! Maisie, in a little fur cap. . . . He was rather a nut on the ice. A frosty Christmas would be no end of a rag.

And, beyond all these superficial reasons for elation, in defiance of the ugly road and the moist trickle down his neck, Hal, rather amused at himself for the imagery, wished he could pick up a small sharp knife and cut cleanly out from the shining curve of his future, the one black speck that spoiled it. That beastly business of his subscription to the Memorial to the Winborough Boys fallen in the Great War!

It would crop up quite early in the term, he knew. And his father had promised him an extra five bob for it. Five bob! *Well . . .* but he was Head of

the School. And, in a matter like this, to be mean! If it were anything less solemn and patriotic and all that. He had known, personally, Roger Groves, and Latimer Major, and Brown, and Corbett—all among the Fallen. His would be the first name on the list. He ought to set an example of two quid, at least. The Guv'nor didn't see it. He disapproved on principle of memorials when they took the shape of gym-halls and playgrounds and free libraries . . . said that the Fallen would prefer the funds to be spent on providing employment for their discharged comrades. Hal allowed some sense in this, but he doubted if old Latimer were of the kind to worry much either way, wherever he was. But he would have understood, fast enough, that Hal, the first of Winborough's athletic divinities, setting down his subscription prominently at the top of the list, could not put forth his Guv'nor's principles as an excuse for shabbiness.

Five shillings. Add fifteen from his own pocket-money—and more than this would absolutely cripple him for the term—and still he was a pound short of what he wanted to give. Hal went into the Bank with Aunt Lavvy's cheque.

Banks are impersonal things; the money that pours out from them is unlimited. It does not belong to the clerk, nor even to the branch manager. So that, when he came out, and discovered, carelessly counting the notes before thrusting them into his pocket, that

he had one pound more in hand then he had to pass over to Aunt Lavvy, he could not, in his swift exultation, visualize any destination for the note except the Memorial.

His imagination, already more exuberantly goat-footed than normal, that morning, had had no time to subside, before this overwhelmingly magical response came to his wish that the blemish might be neatly removed from the radiance of all his to-morrows. His flood of relieved gratitude was as simple as that of some boy of ancient Greece who recognizes, by a gift dropped to his feet from Olympus, that he is indeed beloved of the gods.

Could God really work miracles in this altogether decent fashion, prompt, without excess, and without fuss? Hal didn't call it God—he felt, dimly, that this would be "swank." But acknowledging that "luck" had with intention singled him out, he called it luck with a shy reverence that confessed a salute to the Deity behind it.

The lapse had occurred then. An uncanny moral lapse—but not a guilty one. The guilt was later, when, his spirit snubbed by the fact that the pound had not materialized out of nowhere to make him happy, he had not once rapped out: "Here you are, Aunt Lavvy, the chap made a mistake, and handed me out six of 'em. . . ."

But he had funked it, seeing then that he might have to explain his luck-loves-me mood in front of

Nina and Mrs. Fraser and his mother and Ursula and Miss Roberts—— Anyhow, what were they all doing crowded up in the drawing-room?

“But when did you notice it, Hal?”

“Why didn’t you take it back at once?”

He could have pretended only to discover it in his pocket then . . . it had got loose from the little bundle—“Good Lord, yes, here it is!”

But that would have been a lie, too, and secret acknowledgment that he had no claim on the note from the beginning. Before he could decide what to do, he had said: “Sorry, Aunt Lavvy——” But now he repudiated the absurd childish mood which had led to his acceptance of bounty from nowhere. For a few moments, he had been more than self-conscious schoolboy; for a few moments, he had held happiness like a flask of wine, shot gold with slanting sunbeams, high above his head. For a few moments he had held it there, shouting. . . .

These emotional chaps—all over the place—came to grief sometime. . . . “I warn you, Bunny. Besides, it isn’t done.”

There was a stagnant smell round the “earth-works”—rotting leaves, and moisture, and a flat grey sky. . . .

He was, without excuse, without fine shades of “but” and “because,” a thief and a liar—and deadly miserably ashamed of himself.

Hal dragged himself to his feet, and wondered drearily to whom his first abasement and confession

should be. If it were Winborough, of course he would go straight to the Head. School was so—uncomplicated, compared with home.

Nina was his natural confidante, as far as he had ever needed one, which was only a very little way. But Nina—thought such a lot of him. You need not necessarily choose your highest pedestal to fall from. Bunny? Before he could decide, Bunny came sauntering dejectedly down to the earthworks.

“Hello!”

“Hello!”

“Just finished doing old Nina’s bed. She’s frightfully fed-up with me,” Bunny explained inconsequently. “It wasn’t the frog she minded, it was that Fraser person.” Then, with a sudden wrench: “I’m in a deuce of a mess!”

And Hal found himself listening, with his habitual air of half-humorous authority, to Bunny boasting of his caricature and tuck-shop scrapes. Bunny always laughed and boasted when he was a little bit afraid. His eyes pleaded absolution from his senior’s jawing.

“You’ll just have to be a martyr to art and stand the racket from old Bateman. I can’t help you there. But how much d’you owe at Swayne’s? fifteen bob? Right, I’ll drop him a line presently, and say I’ll pay it on the first day of the term for certain. It needn’t get round to the Guv’nor—he’s sick with you as it is for not getting a move.” Fifteen shillings he could spare Bunny from his next term’s pocket-money, and the pound would have to go back to the Bank from

whence it came. And the mean five shillings left from the two pounds of that morning's glorious reckoning, would head the subscription list for the Memorial. He would bend his head to the discipline when it came. But meanwhile, Hal's tormented self-respect had craved just once more to be the one to help.

"Can you really manage it, old thing?" Bunny dug one heel into the ground, the off-hand gratitude in his voice an imperfect crust to conceal the burning lava of worship within. Hal did not pour out the tale of his crime to his young brother—he could not contemplate reversing their present satisfactory attitude of give-and-take. Besides, Bunny's almost certainly flippant treatment of the whole matter, sunnily hailing Hal on level ground, would jar badly. With a curt nod, Hal dismissed him, unburdened now, whooping the whole way up the garden.

Not Nina, and not Bunny, then. And Grace was too inconveniently one with Stanley to be considered. Ursula he still lumped together in his mind with Miss Roberts and Lottie as "schoolroom gang." The Guv'-nor would be so—so fatherish, when told: "That any son of mine——" was inevitable. And Mother——

The shock broke over him again. That he was a thief. And that they would all have to know it, all. So what was the sense of rejecting first one and then the other, as a first hearer? He might as well go straight to William! Unless Aunt Lavvy——

If Aunt Lavvy were privately confided in, her

instinct would undoubtedly be to shield Hal. He could not help knowing that he was a favourite with her; that, almost as though she were a young girl again, she loved his bigness, his slow chaff of her pretty rosy little weaknesses, his arm round her shoulders. Given the missing treasury note, she could quite easily arrange the matter with the Bank so that no other member of the family need hear anything about—an hour's theft.

"After all, I found it in my bag with the other notes—two of them had stuck together. Indeed, I do hope you will forgive me for not having looked more carefully when you telephoned. . . ." She might explain it thus. Anyhow, Aunt Lavvy, bless her, could be trusted to manipulate the affair with her most neat-witted diplomacy. Only—would he, by this, be shirking punishment?

But though he was dazed and shocked at his own matter-of-course acceptance of the note, he still did not own to guilt at that point. . . . It was something that happened to him, not something that he had done. He had not yet begun to figure the special terror that this involved. But, if not guilty, need he seek punishment?

And for the silence which was deliberate and cowardly in the drawing-room just now? "Won't it do," Hal wondered, for the first time in his existence of straightforward rights and wrongs, trying to hold the scales on his own responsibility, doing question and answer both, worrying over cause and effect,

balancing and fine adjustment, "Won't it do if I only leave myself that five bob to plank down first on the subscription list?"

By promising Bunny that fifteen shillings, he had doled himself out quite a fair prospect of suffering. Five shillings from the magnificent Head of the School, and next on the list, thirty shillings, say, from that dud Parkinson. The ignominy would have to be endured with shut teeth. "Won't that be enough?" Hal pleaded with himself, as he thought, enthroned as judge. . . . Never again, with Who-ever—Whatever—had tripped him up with vision and swift miracle, that morning; had cheated him for ever of self-confidence, and given him bewilderment in its stead. . . . Ought a fellow's punishment—beastly word—be finely tempered to what he had not felt wrong when he did it? or ought it to be for how wrong it looked after it was done?

Hal, in his first conflict with ethics, was about as happy as a bear in boxing-gloves, putting together the minute works of a watch. His only mitigation was that he did not recognize "the whole foul mess" as ethics, or he would have regarded his entanglement with any process so priggish, as his final humiliation.

"I've had enough of this—" and with a sigh of relief at a vigorous decision, he strode determinedly in search of Aunt Lavvy.

But the luncheon-gong was being sounded as he came up the few perforated iron steps that led back

from the garden into the drawing-room. And Hal had to submit to another hour with a one-pound treasury note that did not belong to him hidden in his pocket, accumulating reproach with every wasted moment. By now he was violently anxious to deliver it up to Aunt Lavvy, albeit not quite sure what, even then, and after a full confession, might yet remain behind with him.

Directly after lunch, he followed her to her room:
“May I come in, Aunt Lavvy?”

“Of course, my dear boy.” She sank into one of her round chintz armchairs with their dumpy old-rose and silver-grey cushions, and smiled up at Hal, standing with his hands in his pockets—no, with one hand in one pocket—in front of the empty fire-place.

“Not too loud, if this is to be secrets,” she whispered, with a nod at the door leading to Ursula’s room. “well, and so vacation is nearly over. Don’t correct me, Hal. I’m practising for next year when you’re at the ‘Varsity. It would be too, too terrible if I spoke of ‘holidays’ then, wouldn’t it?” Then, as his silence became formidable—“Is it really something serious, Hal dear? I ought to have seen you were not in the mood for nonsense. Tell me.”

He brought out a crumpled oblong of thin paper, blurred with a dull brown and green design.

“Here you are,” he said gruffly.

But the situation was fifty times stiffer than he had imagined it. He wished that Aunt Lavvy would hurry up and begin to fold it into pliable shape.

"Where did you find it?" she asked, startled.

"I didn't find it. I had it."

Bunny, practised in confession, would have added appeal, whether of eyes or tongue. But Hal was waiting for Aunt Lavvy's help before he could add anything to the bald statement, though she would understand, even back to the irrelevance of Maisie and the Michaelmas daisies . . . perhaps she would of her own accord propose to "put things right" with the Bank. He had come to her eager for this gift of "put-things-right," and venerating her for possessing it. . . . His throat was gritty, and his knees felt weak.

"Well!" exclaimed Aunt Lavvy at last in an indignant whisper. And again, after several seconds had loudly ticked away—"Well" . . .

Hal turned his back and rushed out of the room.

What had happened to the world of usual things that, on the same morning as he had betrayed his own code, Aunt Lavvy had failed him?

He stumbled into the den which he shared with Bunny, and where William slept. Bunny was there, sprawling across William's bed, reading "Penrod."

"Thought you'd gone out. I say, what about a spin to Badgery Wood this afternoon?" He looked up for an answer, and saw Hal's face. "I say . . . what—what is it?"

Half an hour ago, Hal had been nervous that Bunny, hearing the tale, would be exasperatingly flippant about it. But now, after that terrifying

glimpse of Aunt Lavvy metamorphosed by anger, he rather wanted to hear his brother's light-hearted: "What's the odds?"

When he had finished, Bunny sat staring at the floor, his face getting redder and redder.

"Well?" impatiently. And, echoing Aunt Lavvy: "Well?" Hal rapped out again.

Bunny was crying.

And then Hal gave in to the fact that one swerve from the usual had carried him into a wholly unfamiliar world of behaviour, and that he could not find any way back again from strangeness.

"When you've quite done," he growled; adding, "You'd have been surprised if I'd burst out blubbing when you let on to me about your precious scrapes, out in the garden just now."

"This isn't a scrape," gulped out Bunny.

Hal stopped being a mere schoolboy.

"You mean . . . it's worse? It's the sort of thing one gets put in gaol for?"

Bunny nodded, and dabbed his eyes, too shocked and miserable even to care that he had been seen crying.

Hal sat down on the edge of the bed, hands interlocked across his knees, his broad shoulders bent forward.

"That's just it"—after a long pause. "It puts the wind up me a bit to realize that if I could freeze on to that quid—I could do almost anything. I could do anything," he repeated, cutting out the "al-

most.” “And the fact that I wasn’t really that sort of chap—that of course I was always frightfully down on lying and cheating and—and thieving—the sort of things a decent fellow doesn’t do—it wouldn’t stop me. Like it hasn’t stopped me this time. It’s awful not to be certain that one has any sort of a self that one can rely on.”

“Murder?” whispered Bunny, his imagination, always on a loose rein, beginning now to gallop. “Could it just as easily have been murder, you mean? And is that how criminals do it—in the same way as you. . . .”

“I suppose so.”

“Then—nobody’s safe—not even ordinary people?” They both felt horror very close to them . . . stirring their hair with its breath.

“And—feeling so oddly bucked just before——”

“They might have meant that. Like premonition upside down.” Bunny had a swift glimpse into the neat ironies in life’s working-out. But when Hal gruffly bade him explain himself, he pretended, out of an odd deference to his senior’s less flexible speech and fancy, that he could not. This was not the time to swank any superiority over Hal. You only did that in the days when he was indubitably the Magnificent, and in self-defence you paraded any small advantages that were yours. The significance of any need for chivalry smote Bunny with a fresh pang . . . he fought back a great lump which swelled up in his throat. “Need any one know?”

"The money's got to go back somehow, hasn't it?"
"Aunt Lavvy——"

"I've just come from Aunt Lavvy."

"Oh—good!" Bunny sighed, faintly relieved.

"No." Hal contradicted him with a touch of grimness. "Not a bit of good. She's as hard as nails."

"Aunt Lavvy?"

And Hal suddenly made a brilliant, if embittering, discovery: "Scratch an Aunt Lavvy," he flung into the face of Bunny's incredulity, "and you find a paying guest underneath."

[VII]

G RACE WATSON knocked at the door of the attic Miss Roberts shared with Lottie:

"Am I disturbing you? I looked into the nursery on my way up, and saw Lottie there with my babies, so I thought you might be alone."

The governess beamed a welcome with her teeth, and hustled Grace out of two consecutive chairs into a third which was dubitably more comfortable.

"And I thought it would be a great help to talk over this terrible affair quietly with some one sensible," continued Grace, who believed too firmly in the wonders achieved by quiet "talking-over."

"Oh dear!" Miss Roberts began, tentatively, to be shocked and grieved.

And then, in sedate sentences, for even in the midst of spiritual turmoil Grace's language never became

correspondingly wild and tattered, she told the story she had just heard from her mother.

"Mother's in the drawing-room crying, and wondering how she can bear to break it to Father this evening. He's been so proud of Hal, you know—his eldest son."

"He may be shielding somebody," exclaimed Miss Roberts, brightly. "Bunny, for instance!" She had a thrilling mental picture of Hal, a head taller than Bunny, with one arm flung round his young brother's shrinking—and unmistakably guilty—shoulders, while in those fearless steady tones of one whose own conscience knew no burdens, he confessed to a crime which was not his. Such luscious fancies sprang too easily into Miss Roberts' mind, showing that a corner of it was in an unaired condition, for all its surface chattiness. But she was only paid thirty pounds a year, and for Lottie's sake she slept with the attic window open all the year round, and went for a brisk walk every day in all weathers. The Maxwells, for their thirty pounds a year, could hardly expect further hygienic sacrifice from her. Then, leaving the Bunny idea in a state of incompletion: "Surely dear Miss Lavinia will settle the whole affair happily for you? That is to say, as far as it can ever be happy, knowing that Hal——" She shook her head mournfully; but the mournfulness was not very deeply rooted. Truth to tell, Miss Roberts drew more pleasure from the present excitement of the idol overthrown, than she had ever drawn from

the negative rejoicing in Hal's unquestioned integrity.

"I don't know," Grace replied slowly. "I haven't seen Aunt Lavvy, but Mother says—Mother was overwrought, I suppose. She imagines that Aunt Lavvy has suddenly turned into a sort of fiend who will talk of nothing but her own good name with the Bank, which must be restored at all costs. But naturally Aunt Lavvy was a little bit annoyed, and said one or two things she didn't mean. Mother ought to have made allowances. That's what I'm so afraid of, Miss Roberts: that everybody in this house will be so stupefied that Hal of all boys could have committed a common theft——" Miss Roberts made shocked noises. "You can't talk things over with any good results unless you call them by their proper names," said Grace, firmly settling the neat little bow at her throat.

"How clear-headed you are!" admiringly, from Miss Roberts.

"Oh, I'm not. At least, if I am, it's only what I've picked up from Stanley. And that reminds me, Mother actually doesn't want me to tell Stanley when he comes home: 'Oh do for heaven's sake keep it in the family!' she cried. I was rather hurt, as this is the first time that she's mentioned Stanley as though he weren't quite one of the family." She paused a moment, and then clinched her argument: "Because, after all, he lives in the house."

Miss Roberts tried to convey by her expression that she entirely agreed with Grace, but that at the

same time she did not consider the fact that she herself lived in the house lifted her to an equal level of privilege and family-membership as Mr. Stanley Watson.

"It would be a terrible thing for Hal if it got known as far as Winborough or the 'Varsity, that he had taken money that didn't belong to him. It might ruin his career. But if we all keep our heads, and don't get hysterical—I met Bunny racing down the stairs just now with his eyes as red as fire, so I suppose he knows."

"I confess I am surprised that Bunny should have taken it that way. He is a dear boy, but not very serious, as a rule."

"Hal was his idol." Grace spoke gently. "Schoolboys don't say much about their feelings, you know, but I suspect this has gone rather deep with Bunny."

"How you see everybody's point of view," murmured Miss Roberts, dripping appreciation.

"Stanley always says the one thing he can't bear is intolerance. He can lead one right through history from the early pre-Egyptian period, and show step by step how bigotry alone has dragged great men and great nations to their ruin."

"How interesting to hear him!" cried Miss Roberts, who, lest she be misunderstood, was not in the least a humbug nor a sycophant, but merely suffered from a nature devoid of the critical faculty.

Grace got up to go. "I think you had better tell

Lottie, Miss Roberts, and Ursula, too. They are bound to notice something wrong, and Ursula, especially, has a habit lately of bursting out with such odd things."

"She's at the awkward age, of course"; but Miss Roberts had been having trouble with Ursula for the past year or two, and did not display quite as much gums and enthusiasm as she usually did in defence of her pupils.

"Miss Roberts, aren't we going for a walk this afternoon?" Lottie trotted in, with the moral shine about her of having that morning helped Bunny remake Nina's bed, and that afternoon kept Honor Rose amused for three-quarters of an hour while Nurse dressed.

"Yes, dear, now. And tell Ursula I wish her to come too. I've something to tell you both."

"Something nice?"

"I'm afraid not—but," brightly, "things can't always be nice, can they?"

Grace, with a low: "Thank you so much. You've been such a help," left the room.

The tidings of "something wrong" were beginning to creep about the house, to make themselves felt uneasily . . . but Nina was still in ignorance, for the straightforward reason that Hal himself and every one else dreaded too much the ordeal of breaking it to her. In the end it was William who voluntarily undertook the task.

"I've just been with Lottie," he informed Nina,

in the passage outside the door of her room. "And she's just been with Miss Roberts."

"Get on with it," laughed Nina, knowing that no dynamo on earth would urge William beyond his own stolid conception of speed.

"Grace told Miss Roberts, and Mother told Grace. Aunt Lavvy told Mother."

"Well, what?" Nina was careless of the abyss on whose brink she stood.

"That Hal stole the pound belonging to the Bank."

"You'd better be careful what you're saying, young man." Nina laughed scornfully. "*Hal*, indeed!"

William looked at her with round eyes that held something of pity. "You'd rather it was Bunny. But it wasn't. It was Hal. I'm sorry he did it, but I'd rather for once it was him." He paused. Then, with a disgusting lapse from chivalry: "You never thought much of Bunny next to Hal, did you?"

Nina stood for a moment rigid, as though the whole of her life were in suspension. Then, angrily brushing William aside, she marched straight into the boys' den. To Hal's moody vision, she seemed strangely out of proportion in her big hard-ring-ing incredulity. He clenched his hands, dreading the next few minutes; wishing that a powerful wave could lift him bodily and set him down again on the lee-ward side of them.

"William has the cheek to say——"

"Yes. It's true."

"You *didn't*?"

He was silent.

"Hal, not . . . you?"

"Why shouldn't it be me?"

"Stealing?" Her mouth was drawn in pain as though she were sucking at some bitter fruit.

He nodded. No hope of explaining with any success to Nina, as to Bunny, the slippery differences which separated his act from stealing. He had only just learnt himself that such differences existed; and Nina certainly would not and could not admit them, except as an attempt at cowardly shirking of consequences.

He had hardly glanced at consequences, yet.

"I wish I was dead," Nina broke out suddenly.

"Don't be a damned idiot."

"It's as ghastly for me as for you. Can't you see that? I've always backed you up."

No, there were no surprises in conduct from Nina, as there had been from himself, from Aunt Lavvy and from Bunny. Every one of the raging contemptuous accusations which stammering she hurled at him, had already sounded across his mind during the past hour. Nina, like all those cool clear people who hold that it is bad form to show or even to feel emotion, was betrayed by a genuine blow into melodrama.

"I've always backed you up. If you had got into any *decent* scrape. . . . But—Good Lord!—the commonest board-school cad would have more sense of

honour. . . . Men sometimes steal when they're hungry—starving—but you—— What do you suppose they'll say at Winborough? A girl from our school was expelled once for pinching half-a-crown that didn't belong to her—serve her right—but she was a snivelling little rat, and her people were no class. I suppose you'd cheat at games now. Oh, I—I don't want ever to see anybody again . . . they'll be laughing at me even if they don't say it straight out. I've swanked about you, and you've let me down."

It was all in that last phrase.

"I never asked you to swank about me," said Hal slowly. He was standing with his back to her, looking out of the window, and bidding good-bye to a Nina deferential in spirit, though offering, for appearance's sake, a casual surface to his lordly good humour. A Nina persistently engaged in his service, preoccupied with his interests, obstinately compelling family and outsiders to acknowledge his supremacy. Hal sighed, relinquishing his glorious past.

"I wish to God you'd shut up and go away."

With her hand on the door, Nina turned: "How was it found out?"

"Found out?" Hal was glad of a cue to be angry in his turn. "What the devil do you mean—found out? I told Aunt Lavvy directly——"

"Directly she asked you? It was at the 'phone, and you lied about it. I was there and heard you. You pretended to look in your pockets."

Hal shrugged his shoulders. "All the same I told Aunt Lavvy myself. Directly after lunch." But "directly I came to my senses . . ." was what he had been going to say before.

"I suppose she'll try and shield you. I wouldn't in her place."

"You would. But she won't. She's livid."

"*Aunt Lavvy!*!" A short scornful laugh from Nina. Aunt Lavvy, with all her gentle wisdom, her sweet eyes, her pretty dainty habits, her silvery sense of humour, her tolerance, her tact, and the secret niche of favouritism which Hal and Nina jointly occupied in her heart—*livid* indeed!

She would be deeply sorry, yes! Nothing more damaging than that.

"Better go and find out for yourself."

"I will, then."

But Aunt Lavvy was down in the drawing-room, having tea.

Tea, as the first public re-union since lunch, was also the tangible betrayal of moral disorganization at the Laburnums. Aunt Lavvy, Miss Roberts, Ursula and Lottie were present. Mrs. Maxwell and Grace had been invited to tea with Mrs. Fennimore, the banker's wife; and, after a hurried talk-over with Miss Roberts, Grace had decided it the wiser policy and the truest service to her country—i. e., the family—to go as though nothing had happened, and make excuses for Mrs. Maxwell, whose blotched and tear-swollen condition still kept her to her room.

"You see, Miss Roberts, nobody outside the house *knows* anything yet, and we mustn't let them begin to suspect. . . ."

Hal, aware that by some pressure of invisible law he would have to appear at dinner, renounced his tea, and, like his mother, shut himself up in his room. He shut himself up there too long, so that the prospect of ever leaving it and facing publicity swelled to abnormal difficulty.

Bunny forlornly marched away for a solitary walk; and William, with the precaution of a large bun annexed from the tea-table, had followed him. He did not catch up with Bunny, but was satisfied to march unobserved about a hundred yards behind him. He saw him fling himself face downwards in a field; sat down and waited . . . and finally arrived home about eight minutes in Bunny's rear.

Nina, bursting open the door in her search for Aunt Lavvy, had thrown a look of disgust at the "schoolroom mess" present, and rushed out again.

Lottie asked if she might carry up a cup of tea and some cake to poor Hal. Aunt Lavvy's face became smooth and uninterested. But Miss Roberts, to Ursula's horror, gave assent: "Do, dear, that will be very nice of you."

"You're not to, Lottie," Ursula cried passionately.

"Really, Ursula——"

"She's only curious. Let her take Mother a cup if she wants a canteen job."

Aunt Lavvy said, with the faint lisp in her voice

a little more assertive than usual: "Do you know, Lottie darling, I'd have given you the job of bringing my tea upstairs if I'd only had a little sitting-room of my own. Food in one's bedroom is not very tempting, is it? But just today——"

She sighed. Then smiled bravely, with the corners of her mouth—not with all of it—when Miss Roberts sympathetically asked whether she had a headache, and replied: "No, I mustn't indulge myself by pretending I have. The headache pose is fatally tempting to old ladies. You'll know one day, Miss Roberts."

"That was meant for Mother," reflected Ursula; "and sending Miss Roberts down for stronger tea—she's never done it before—was to impress Gums and the servants that she has a right to it because she pays." Ursula was making the same discovery as erstwhile Hal had made. "'Just today' was a stinger for Hal. And 'the little sitting-room of her own' she aimed at——"

Ursula, subconsciously, winced with fear.

"Are you going to split on Hal to the Bank?" she asked, wondering what made her voice sound so noisy.

Again that curious glassy obstinacy passed over Aunt Lavvy's usually mobile prettiness. She replied nothing, but with careful selection she put aside the slices of the Swiss Roll and cut herself a piece from the uncut portion.

"Ursula, really, this is going too far. This is

disloyal. When your Aunt Lavvy is doing her best to behave as though nothing had happened——”

“Why should she? Something *has* happened. But it’ll be like that all the time, I know. Mother will come down to dinner trying to look as though she hadn’t cried, and we’ll all look as though of course she hadn’t. And Father will simply shut up and not play. He’s never supposed to join in when the rest of us pretend. And Grace will talk tactfully to Stanley about the babies, and how town is looking, and her tea-party, and the leaves falling. And Gums will ‘draw out’ Lottie, and we’ll all of us not stare at Hal, and feel beastlier than we’ve ever felt before, and goodness knows what Nina and Bunny will do, because I haven’t seen them since it happened. But it might be a bit better—not much, but a bit—if we could all be as glum as we liked.”

“Would you have said that during the war, Ursula? Why, I think it was splendid how every one hid their own feelings and were cheerful.” Miss Roberts, having been officially given charge of the situation by Grace—who had not got it to give—and asked to take care of it until a quarter to six, was feeling the hours unwontedly taut and thrilling.

“This isn’t the war. It’s *us*.”

[VIII]

M R. MAXWELL and Stanley returned together from the golf-house about six o'clock, and were at once anxiously taken possession of by their wives. Presently, Hal received the summons he expected to the study.

It was not to be the old thunderous "You young rascal" business, such as Bunny always encountered, but a Serious Talk; the kind that began: "Don't be afraid of me, my boy. . . ."

Hal *was* afraid. A wrathful parent was a thing that might happen to any fellow. There was, however, a strange solemnity, proving his crime in an unspeakable category, about a father who suddenly treated him as an equal. "I want your confidence, my boy. After all, I'm your father. What was your motive?"

If Hal had kept the money to extricate himself from some tangible male scrape—such as a bar-maid—he might have been able to respond to the spirit of gruff intimacy which the crisis had brought about. It was obviously impossible to pour out in his own defence a lot of vaporous drivel about Michaelmas daisies and the goodness of God. He was miserably certain in his own mind that his father was going to drag in religion pretty soon—*real* religion, the Sunday kind.

And sure enough, Tom Maxwell, really staggered

in his pride and his safe trust in permanence, by Hal's lapse from everyday honesty, was unable to find any other contribution to the scene than the Eighth Commandment.

"Yes, I know," muttered Hal.

For the last six years they had talked only of sport: cricket, football, boxing, rowing, and, occasionally, to humour the older man, golf. On this basis, they had presented an appearance of chumminess which, the world declared, was so typical of the modern unformidable relations between two generations.

Now—"Can I go, father?"

"Suppose it gets talked about round here? Suppose your Aunt Lavvy refuses. . . . Your future career. . . . A good name travels by road, a bad name by express." Mr. Maxwell was too dispirited even to disavow his originality by a pretence of inverted commas.

Hal's dread of public humiliation did not stretch beyond Winborough. That was bad enough, and too bad to face. Home was only an episode that occurred three times a year.

Mr. Maxwell went slowly back to his wife, and closed the bedroom door behind him. "He won't confess. I did my best."

"She'll tell." Florrie Maxwell, with shaking fingers, tried to fasten up her plentiful black hair.

"Nonsense. What nonsense you talk, Florrie. One would think Lavvy was a vindictive woman. She's as fond of the children as we are. After all

these years! Besides, the thing that matters is not whether everybody gets to know, but that Hal should have——”

“Hal’s Hal to me, whatever he did. I want to save him being punished, that’s all. But Lavinia *is* vindictive. You’ve never seen it. You’ve only seen that she’s got a best-china-tea-set face and a pretty refined voice, and knows just the right thing to say. . . . D’you think I’ve liked it, having her always in the house to put matters right with you or Nina or Bunny, after I’ve maybe been too quick or clumsy and blundered somewhere? I’d have rather they stayed wrong, thank you. A paying guest’s one thing, for you know exactly what you’re getting from her; and how much ‘Aunt Lavvy’ here, and ‘Aunt Lavvy’ there, you can allow her for the money. But what she’s been doing in the house for the last fifteen years . . . unless it was for you to keep on comparing her with me, as I’ve seen you doing over and over again. And the children, too. But they can be excused, because she’s clever, and she worked for it, and the Lord gave her silver hair and a sweet voice, and it’s worth a bit of play-acting to be the one in the house that everybody comes to first. But you, Tom, to have been taken in too—she’s selfish and hard, for all her soft ways, and as obstinate. . . . Well, you’ll see in the next few days, and I’m glad of it, because for you to have thought she was the sort of lady you’d rather have married—and I’ve seen you thinking it over and

over again. Oh, I may talk too loud and laugh too heartily, and perhaps I'm not dainty enough, and my dresses don't look like Lavvy's. . . . Nina says they always gape where they do up. . . . For all that, when it comes to a wife, you're better off with me than with her, or else you ought to have known beforehand which was the kind you admire, and not have special manners for her and the ordinary kind will do for me. . . ."

And having several times worked up to a climax without achieving it, Mrs. Maxwell went on with the suspended work of fastening that thick untidy tail of black hair. She was rather tremulous, but hopeful, now that she had at last relieved herself, that Tom would give the cue for a sentimental reconciliation. As a matter of fact, the poor woman believed that she had expressed her secret bitterness far more poignantly than was actually the case. Her personality was not fitted to translate pathos . . . with those dropping hairpins, and the bodice of her purple stuff dress dangling limply downwards from the waist, where she had just now slipped her arms out, to wash.

Her husband was angry. He fumbled for his justification. Florrie knew quite well *why* Miss Lavinia had become Aunt Lavvy, and why she had stayed on in the house after they could have afforded to manage without her. If the world accepted her welcome entrance in the character of delightful-old-Aunt, her sudden exit as a superfluous lodger would

have upset the whole illusion. No need for Florrie to pretend that she wouldn't have minded Buckler's Cross knowing it had been a vulgar financial arrangement. And then, Florrie owned up barely half her own shortcomings as though these were all, which he felt vaguely was an injustice to his tolerance; not only had he suffered her loud voice and coarse laugh and her dresses that were always failures, and her lamentable lack of tact; but she had no delicate little reserves; and her fresh complexion had deepened to mauve with tiny scratching red lines where the colour was most violent; and she was too intimate with inferiors, hoping vainly thus to ingratiate herself . . . and . . . oh, thousands of minor irritations! If she owned she was one thing, she ought to own to the rest, in fairness to what he had to put up with.

Her dressing-table . . . useless china ornaments and stands and trays pushed about anyhow, and her brush with the handle broken off years ago and never mended; she wielded it from the jagged stump. A lace collar that had not been put away; a bottle of medicine, half empty, dusty; pins and safety-pins and brooches; a photograph of her parents; and a twist of paper screwed into the support of the looking-glass so that it should not swing backwards. . . .

He was conscious of a tired nausea at the sight of her dressing-table. . . . What did Lavvy's look like? Ah, that was it? She did not see that Lavvy could still represent to him a woman mysterious and

fragrant, coming down to dinner from behind closed doors. He remembered now having once said to Florrie in a burst of confidence after a successful "musical evening," that they ought to be right-down proud of having Lavvy to live with them, because anybody could spot that she was better-class than themselves.

If Florrie had been offended then, why didn't she say so? Hang it, he had included himself in the inferiority!

He was accumulating grievances, while he moved about the room, changing from his golfing tweeds into "something comfortable," while Florrie waited, with turbulent heart, for the miracle of understanding to take place in him.

The children. They carried their confidences to Lavvy, and Florrie was jealous. Women were always jealous, and never logical. If, instead of being cattish, she had studied the reason why Grace and Nina and Hal and Ursula and Bunny and Lottie and William preferred Aunt Lavvy, except for the perfunctory "of course Mother comes first" . . . Florrie was so brusque and boisterous with them—laughed at their bruises and snubbed their sorrows; furthering her ridiculously overdone theory of "not putting up with any nonsense." Had Florrie been tenderer—

Then Ronald might have been alive still.

And Hal would probably not have disgraced them all by keeping money which did not belong to him.

Queer—how this stormy business with Hal had tossed up the forgotten jetsam of the years! How long was it since he had grieved for Ronald? The child was only three when he had died of the measles. . . . “Better let ‘em all have it together, and get it over” . . . that was Florrie. And Ronald had got it over—promptly.

But if Florrie had only taken a decent mother’s care of the little chap. . . .

And Mr. Maxwell said so, quite suddenly, having reach this point in his reflections without giving his wife any clue as to how he got there. She had hoped he was all the while dreaming back to their courtship. Perhaps he might break out with: “By George, Flo, d’you remember that drive home from Richmond in the hansom, after the Wilkinsons’ ball?”

But . . . Ronald? She stared, stupefied. And then she gulped: “You might as well say straight out I’m a murderer.”

“I didn’t say that, but it doesn’t do to be too slap-dash with babies. Tender at the two ends, tough in the middle, is most persons’ lives!”

“I’ve brought up seven healthy ones for you. Or perhaps *Lavvy* brought them up?” Her uncontrollable grievance had possessed her again, and she linked it on to his, with: “I suppose—if Lavvy had been Ronald’s mother——”

“He might not have,” Tom Maxwell answered her. And left the room.

Downstairs in the hall, on the salver, a letter

awaited him, just come by the seven o'clock post. And next to the letter stood Bunny:

“It’s for you, dad.”

“Ah—thank you, my boy!”

With eyes more than usually bright and dark, Bunny watched him read it. He had known from the postmark and uncertain handwriting, “Mr. Maxwell” instead of “T. Maxwell, Esq.,” that it was from the tuck-shop to which he owed fifteen bob. Hal’s note, written after lunch, and containing a postal order for that sum, was too late to save him from exposure. But Bunny was glad of it. His imagination had given birth to a scheme in bold colourings and with some surprising dramatic effects, directly he had spotted that letter on the salver.

“I thought I’d forbidden you to owe to the tradesmen round your school, Bunny.”

But it would have been “Bernard,” and a much sterner tone, if Hal’s crime had not dwindled a mere scrape to insignificance.

“Yes, I know, dad. I’m sorry. You’ve guessed now, of course, why Hal kept back that quid from the Bank?”

“You asked him——?” And the burden of depression lightened with Bunny’s answer:

“Yes, I was dead scared that old Swayne would write to you. He’d threatened to; so I owned up to Hal—and he sent off the fifteen bob today, and told me not to worry any more. It—was awfully decent of him, wasn’t it, dad?”

"Theft is never decent, my boy."

"But it makes a difference," Bunny urged, "that he grabbed the note to shield me from your wrath?"

"To shield me from your wrath" was overdoing it. And if Mr. Maxwell had remembered more about boys in their teens, he would have realized here that Bunny's confession was too glib and well-produced to be natural. If Bunny had been relating a true state of affairs, his manner would have been either sullen or abashed, and his speech a stumbling incoherence.

"It makes a difference, yes. Go and tell Hal I want him."

Hal listened disgustedly to Bunny's account of the altered situation.

"You costly young fathead. What in the name of Mike made you spin him a yarn like that?"

"Just an idea," Bunny explained airily.

"Idea your grandmother! Well, you can march straight down again, and tell him it's all bunkum." Hal hated theatricals. And no small part of his shame at the recent situation was the fact that it seemed to twitch everybody's behaviour well away from the normal.

Bunny had known Hal well enough not to expect from him a quick flush of emotion, a grateful hand laid on his shoulder, a gruff: "It's—awfully decent of you, Bunny, old man. I shan't forget. . . ." which was the way a boy accepted another boy's sacrifice in the noblest type of school fiction. But he

had just hoped to persuade Hal to acquiesce in the inspired falsehood.

"The letters crossed. You *did* send off fifteen bob for me today. Wasn't it the same quid?"

"No."

"Well, but it works out to the same. When you hung on to Aunt Lavvy's pound, wasn't it because lending me that fifteen bob made you fifteen bob short?"

"No. Nothing to do with it. She'd had her 'phone call from the Bank, and asked me about that extra pound note, before you came out to me at the earthworks about your tuckshop scrape."

Bunny immediately collapsed into tears again.

"Oh—*don't!*" Hal was unhappy and frightened beyond ordinary exasperation now. He simply could not understand what had occurred to Bunny, to weaken him like this. Nor could Bunny, except that his own scrapes always left him something to do, something to suffer, some poise to maintain, and an inner conviction that, in spite of all the surface fuss, they really did not fundamentally matter. Whereas Hal's loss of moral prestige did matter. And it had, moreover, robbed Bunny of a prerogative. Bunny liked being the bad boy of the family. Hal's usurpation of the position was unnatural; and when Bunny tried to adjust the look of things—only the look of them—Hal resisted and made brutal statements of fact. And Bunny felt helpless. . . . Especially as he had lulled his quivering and dam-

aged faith in Hal into a belief that the money had really been annexed in his own interest, and that, therefore, the tuckshop scrape was at the bottom of all the recent widdershins action of the world.

Still showing stained cheeks, and with listless feet, Bunny returned to his father, and repeated Hal's dogged denial of his tale. And Mr. Maxwell spread about the house how Bunny had tried to shield his elder brother by pretending his elder brother was shielding him. And Bunny gained more halo, and was correspondingly more downcast and wretched, wearing it uneasily, as a woman in a resplendent new hat which does not suit her.

[IX]

DINNER forced the scattered agitations of the Laburnums round the same table. It was Hal's reluctance, and not his sense of climax, which brought him last into the dining-room. The occasion was very much as Ursula had foretold, except that she had not reckoned on the swift personal misery which conquered her at the first sight of Hal, hitherto invulnerable, now exposed without his armour of unconscious lordliness.

Up till now, she had been aware of the blow which the family had sustained, without, as it were, becoming intimate with it. But now—"I can't bear it," she told herself, fingers interlocked and crushed to-

gether under the cloth, knees rigid, and heart pounding at a ridiculous pace. . . .

Aunt Lavvy was saying to Stanley: "I'm afraid all your favourite books are too solemn for me, Stanley. I tried hard to read more than seven pages of 'Archæological Splendours of the Dolomites,' but it was doleful work!"

Did none of them *see* . . . that unless he could be quickly protected, big splendid Hal was injured for life?

Surely Aunt Lavvy would not make him face the world—school and 'Varsity and Buckler's Cross—as he now faced the family, apologetically, and with careful eyes that fixed themselves only on inanimate objects. Oh, surely she would not tell?

But Ursula knew she would.

Aunt Lavvy was wearing her prettiest lilac dress, with a strip of black velvet ribbon round the throat, and a cobwebby lace fichu held in its place by a pearl miniature brooch. But Mr. Maxwell was pointedly not admiring her, with a—"There you are?" to the false suspicions of his wife; and Florrie Maxwell was thinking of her sons Ronald and Hal, but mostly of Ronald; and Grace tried, in low tones and by dumb pressure of hand, to cheer her up. Bunny moped, and Nina displayed an attitude of savage silence that defied any reminder of her lifelong championship of a Hal without peer. Lottie, who only had milk and biscuits, passed things to Hal far more often than was necessary; and Stanley and Miss

Roberts and Aunt Lavvy divided the conversation between them.

"And they're the only three not of the family," thought Ursula, to whom alone that night the foggy atmosphere was pellucid. "And they'd none of them do a thing to help Hal, either!"

She lifted her lids suddenly, and met Hal's gaze full upon her. It was as though he pleaded: "Get me out of this. . . ." and then his eyes were downcast again, leaving her with the responsibility.

Stanley Watson and his father-in-law remained over their wine, after the others had left the table with a precipitation that suggested escape rather than withdrawal. Stanley immediately tackled the delicate subject from the point of view neither of Hal nor of Aunt Lavvy, but the bank-clerk:

"Just because our natural desire is to shield Hal, we ought to remember that all the time the poor chap who made the mistake in cashing the cheque will get into trouble unless the guilt is clearly acknowledged in other quarters. Don't you agree with me, sir?"

"No," said Mr. Maxwell resentfully, wondering what his eldest daughter had ever seen in this long-winded prig of a fellow.

Afterwards, he tackled Grace in a corner of the drawing-room.

"But I do so respect Stanley for being able to be just and impartial about it, when, of course, we're all so over-heated, father dear."

"I don't save your husband rent and rates all the year round so that he should be just and impartial when I don't want him to be!" and Mr. Maxwell strode wrathfully away to his study.

Grace, in a sudden shower of tears at the unkind reminder of an obligation, flew in search of her confidante, Miss Roberts. The nursery slid back into a schoolroom directly the babies were in bed; but finding there only Ursula, Bunny, Nina, Lottie, and William in pyjamas—five in hot conclave—she gave them a mere glimpse of her piteously working features, and ran on up to the attic bedroom.

"Now, what's the matter with 'our sensible one'?" Ursula mimicked her mother's usual introduction of Grace to strangers.

"I expect Stanley's taking Aunt Lavvy's side, and father's rowed her about it," was the solution laid down by William's drawl.

"And she tells Gums *everything*, and they say, 'it's been such a relief to talk matters over and get something settled,'" Lottie contributed towards enlightenment. She was a child who could usually be trusted by her elders not to tittle-tattle, but William need not suppose he was unrivalled in the intelligence department.

"Stanley—Aunt Lavvy—Gums——" Ursula sat sideways on the big rocking-horse, her small smooth head, with its lustreless gold hair brushed back to a long plait, tilted against the wallpaper, on which the legend of Miss Muffet and the spider was stamped in

nauseous pale-blue-and-mustard repetition. "Hasn't anything funny struck you about just those three being against us?"

"Against Hal, you mean?"

"Isn't it the same thing?"

Silence duly acknowledged that it was. Nina might be horrified, and Bunny shocked, and William tactlessly quick to emphasize a Bunny no longer inferior, but even in their disillusion they were all untried in the endeavor not to let Hal's humiliation escape beyond the radius of the Laburnums itself.

"Well, what about them?" asked Lottie.

"I know." Bunny listlessly supplied the correct answer to Ursula's flung question. "They're just the only three in the house who aren't family."

Ursula nodded at him. "And it's a mistake to have people living with you who don't belong to the family," she said. "In a crisis, they're blacklegs." She was not sure of the exact meaning of black-legs, but it expressed her secret angry conviction of a citadel betrayed from within.

"I don't believe Aunt Lavvy's really not one of us, and I'm going to her now," and Nina dashed off in a spasm of fierce impulsive energy.

"We should look awf'ly silly," Lottie remarked after a pause, "if she came back and said that Aunt Lavvy said that *of course* she wouldn't tell on Hal, and never meant to, and why hadn't any of us asked her about it before."

William chimed in: "After all, no one except

Hal himself and Mother have heard Aunt Lavvy say a word about telling Mr. Fennimore when he comes to supper tomorrow."

"Is *that* when she means to, William? Who told you?"

It proved on closer examination that William had not been told. It had just drifted into his consciousness that Sunday evening after supper was the time when Aunt Lavvy would elect to inform Buckler's Cross and the world that Hal Maxwell was a thief. They had all wondered *exactly* when . . . but uncertainty penned them in no longer. Somehow they felt William had answered the unspoken query correctly.

"I shouldn't be s'prised if Bunny went to Oxford now," continued William in thoughtful tones.

Immediately, he was smote upon the head. "Why the devil should I?" demanded the second son of the Maxwells.

"Well—" William was in no way perturbed, "now that everything's changed—"

"*Nothing's* changed!"

And then Nina returned to them with the expression of one who has dashed her head with violence into hard clear glass where she expected to find only air.

"Time you were back in bed again, Sweet William," was all she said. "And you, too, Lottie."

"I was just saying," William repeated, with a subtle relevance which was almost incredible, con-

sidering his years, "that I shouldn't be s'prised if Bunny went to Oxford now."

[X]

THE Laburnums next morning resembled a fever-patient whose temperature has inexplicably rushed up in the night.

Everybody in the disturbed household had either lain awake, quietly working up the dimensions of their grievance, viewed from all four points of the compass; or else had awoken with a start to remember that their average life was now occupied by a bogey of horror, which, during the few hours' oblivion, had swelled to a frightfulness out of all proportion.

Aunt Lavvy's bogey was "What must the Bank think of Me." She lay and chafed at the thought that she had not yet freed herself, in the Bank's eyes, from all complicity with the theft of the missing pound note. A good many little spinsters, with an otherwise well-balanced set of values, have this curiously over-rated respect for all male-run institutions connected with capital, income, investments, dividends and cheques. It struck her, while the rain spattered at the window, and the wind creaked the boughs, that she had probably been thrust —through Hal—nearer than ever before to the outer edge of that safe circle which enrings the Law-abiding. Her impeccable name had perished. . . .

She was entangled in an Unpleasant Affair with the Bank. . . . Oh, Mr. Fennimore must be told when he came. She would explain the whole situation to him, down to the final details. It was urgent. . . . She was not afraid, but angry, very angry. Sheer impertinence of Nina to have urged her so impatiently to save Hal at all costs. Hal, indeed!—and unless she looked after her own good name, who would do it for her? The Maxwell children did not really love her, as they always pretended to do; they merely used her as an auntly convenience. And now they all turned upon her as the cause of trouble, even though it was obviously hers and not theirs to be resentful and vindictive. . . . But that was always the way, living with families not your own. . . . She ought to have taken a flat at the time, and not heeded the Maxwells' financial difficulties. A charming, bijou flat—then she could have owned a parma and primrose boudoir as well as a bedroom—

Ursula, who had been dreaming, woke up with a thumping heart, and stretched out her hand to fumble for the matches. . . . She wanted sight of dear familiar things to lull this dreadful uneasiness that sleep and the darkness and memory of yesterday had smuggled into the room.

Familiar things. . . . The tiny grate, in which she had not yet lit her first triumphantly solitary fire; a framed coloured picture, on the wall, of pierrots and a vivid blue background and balloons that were

balls of gold fire; very popular for four-and-sixpence in the picture-shops at the time; and very popular with the flappers of a period grown beyond "Sir Galahad" and Burne-Jones, and far indeed beyond "The Soul's Awakening," to a taste that was "quaint" and "whimsical" or sometimes (proudly) "barbaric."

Ursula, in her barbaric phase, had hung over the mantelpiece a necklace of beads and shark's teeth once given to her by Aunt Lavvy, who had known a missionary.

The pierrot picture and the beads and the fireplace represented to her the supreme gems of the room.

The rag-mat on the linoleum was faded, and the other mat, near the door, did not match it. The wall-paper merely covered the wall with a yellowish-brown effect, and the chintz on the one rickety basket-chair was dim; the cushion a crewel-work relic. The white lumpy spread had been carefully turned back over the iron bedposts. The blind was awry, and showed, beyond the window, a corner of wall and a cistern belonging to the house beside the Laburnums. Warm red stuff curtains which Ursula rather liked, and a light wood dressing-table and wash-stand which she would have hated had they not also been, like everything else in the room, emphatically hers,—these, with another curtain run on a rod across the bulging corner, behind which were her dresses, completed the actual furnishings. She had coaxed Hal

to fix up a shelf for her books—about a couple of dozen, with none of the battered look to them which indicates an owner who is also a lover. Indeed, Ursula valued them more because their rich, cosy appearance covered part of the wall, than for their contents. She treasured far more intimately the lumps and sticks of coloured sealing-wax, gold and lilac and black and emerald-green, and the squat seal, stamped with a “U,” which, with her ink-bottle, lay on the small bamboo table. Also the blue pottery jug on the mantleshelf, holding its bright spread of autumn leaves.

How can one explain the magic of enjoyed loneliness which made each object in the room, the room itself, the shape of it, and the door that kept it apart from the rest of the house, and the view contained in the window, precious and significant to the little girl, sitting up in the bed?

A single bedroom can hold a thousand different dreams—a double bedroom only one reality. And so we imagine wide-eyed sixteen in an obviously appropriate setting of spotless white walls and rose-bud cretonne; with a deep-cushion window-seat, and a view of the sea and moonlight, or a wild-cherry tree in bloom.

Ursula was very far from being a woman yet; very far from being a child. She could be sullen—tomboyish—sedate—pert, without knowing yet which of these personalities was the fundamental herself. Actually, the fundamental herself was Ursula sedate,

shyly impudent, deliciously clear-cut, her brows drawn low and straight over demurely amused eyes; her voice uttering with conscious gentleness some startling decision or idea. "I am the cat that—without defiance and without fuss—walks by itself." That was the real Ursula, which would outlast the romp, the flapper and the stormy adolescent, but which was now only rarely visible through her inevitably tormented years of trying to imitate everybody she admired; and trying to grab and make permanent those glints and hints of splendour which shook pure lights from the leaves on late afternoons in May, or glowed suddenly in the lit wet hedges of October when, towards evening, the sun battled its way from under a day of rain.

Life at the Laburnums was—well, not exactly dull; not a bit dull, in fact, but lacking in wayward glory. No action was ever performed that filled her with bursting gladness, amazement, pride, or a queer big sorrow. Every one was just rather ragged and incomplete, getting over the patchwork somehow, yes—but Ursula's veneration was for completeness. She once thought Aunt Lavvy had achieved it in porcelain fashion. Hence her phase of Aunt-Lavvy-worship. She once thought Nina had achieved it, in her sporting well-groomed golden-boy fashion, hence her phase of Nina—worship. And now—oh, couldn't they see what Hal had lost? What he had lost for ever if Aunt Lavvy kept to her threat of "telling"? He had been invulnerable, a broad-

shouldered, careless, lordly creature. It was, she felt dimly, and then with sudden sureness, Hal's one asset, and the one asset of ten thousand Hals, that they were the type of youth who were ever unconscious of what they did, because what they did was so naturally the right and decent thing.

And now he was maimed—spoilt. His family knew, and that was why he came into dinner with such a poignantly defenceless feeling about him. His family knew, but they might easily forget in a little time, if the rest of the world could be kept in ignorance. Ursula's simply-splendid Hal was menaced, but not yet actually destroyed. And she was aware that since she alone recognized the menace, she was—somehow—responsible.

After some restless tossing, she fell asleep.

[XI]

THE LABURNUMS spent the next day in viciously proving how much too small it was for its occupants.

It was Sunday, and the men were at home. All the morning and afternoon it rained. Everybody had slept badly.

On the previous day, uneasy ancient feuds were swelling up in their pods of silence. Now they suddenly burst from tight enclosure, and were very definitely present and visible. Bitter words had

been spoken; accusations flung from one member of the family to another. They were repeated, and rolled round, within limits of the walls of the house—loyalty would not suffer any outlet to beyond—and rolled back again to their owners. It seemed impossible that so much grievance and anger had lain stagnant until Hal's lapse from the average had sanctioned everybody's lapse. Had Mr. Maxwell really been brooding for years on Florrie's criminal carelessness in letting Ronnie die? Had Florrie Maxwell from the very beginning hated and distrusted and been jealous of her friend, Lavinia? Was all Aunt Lavvy's sweetness and affection for the family hitherto, a mere disguise for her malignant stubborn will, that cared not how she wrecked them all to keep her white reputation at the bank from the faintest suggestion of grubbiness? And Hal—had he never been the splendid Hal, the traditional eldest son, the athletic hero of his almost first-class public-school? And if Mr. Maxwell had resented having the Watsons in the house, and did not consider Stanley as one of the family, why had he waited until now to say so? And *whose* territory was the schoolroom-nursery? . . . The politeness of Miss Roberts and Nurse had become an Awful Politeness; Nurse was an indignant ally on the side of Hal, her first male nursling; and Miss Roberts, flattered by Gracie's confidences, and thoroughly sympathizing with the Watson point of view, followed their lead of strict impartiality and constant references to the

probable state of mind of the bank-clerk, and the injury done to Miss Lavvy, who had always been so kind.

There was no room for all the currents and cross-currents and complications of feeling. They were jostled and bruised together; rebounded, reeling, from one contact, only to bump up against another. There was only just room at the Laburnums for every-day harmony to fit itself in, with no fraction of margin where emergency emotions might expand at ease . . . they were learning that at last. The first big out-of-the-ordinary upset showed them how they were cramped. Perpetually banging doors jarred a dozen headaches, as those who sought an empty room or one special person in the room, irritably vented their disappointment at an unexpected encounter with the wrong occupant. Snatches of irrevelant quarrel drifted about. Crashing voices were overheard, and those who did not shout, whispered and rustled and cast meaning looks. Alliances were suddenly formed that were a surprise even to themselves, and the old unassailable partnerships of ten and twelve years had come unglued.

And that rough intruder, Passion, was the unseen tenant at the Laburnums.

Nobody cared to meet anybody face to face, and they were doing it sixty times an hour. Florrie Maxwell had no means of avoiding Aunt Lavvy unless either of them stopped in their bedrooms;

and the servants, mercilessly curious, were all over the bedrooms, clattering slop-pails, purposely slow at their jobs, until one o'clock. Besides, Aunt Lavvy had recently discovered that a gentlewoman's gracious passage through a day should lead her inevitably from a fragrant toilet and a dainty meal, to a pretty boudoir or parlour, and not back again to the disturbed scene of the toilet. In other words, she sat in the drawing-room. So did Mrs. Maxwell, with intervals in the dining-room, when she could bear no longer the torture of Aunt Lavvy placidly behaving as though nothing had happened.

But Stanley and Grace were in the dining-room; Stanley good-humouredly detached from the Upset (the comprehensive name they had begun to use, for want of a better, in allusion to all that was happening), and Grace offended, because what "father" had said naturally involved "mother." Sometimes she slipped away to talk things over with Miss Roberts. "If only they would all be as sensible as you" was soothing to hear; besides, whenever by quiet policy they re-settled a by-issue, they had a pleasant illusion that, as representatives, they had thereby settled the main issue once and for all.

Miss Roberts was sitting up in her attic room that Sunday morning; but Ursula and Lottie were hanging about in the schoolroom, barely tolerated by Nurse, who, recognizing them as Hal-ites and nurslings of the second generation and not the despised third,

yet could not forget that their presence officially stamped the nursery as a schoolroom.

At one moment, Lottie felt that inaction was unbearable, and stole up into Aunt Lavvy's empty room to see if anything within her scope could be done to sweeten matters and lighten them. She found to her content that the plump little pincushion on the dressing-table was almost void of pins; and, returning to the nursery, waited for Nurse's temporary absence, to tear off several rows from the long bristling paper in the work-basket. Gleefully, she confided her purpose in Ursula, and then trotted back to prick the pins into the cushion to form a huge and elaborate L.

William, not a nice child, had chosen this day of crisis for a bilious attack, which meant a stay in bed, so that Hal was denied the solace of his "den" to himself, and had to endure a series of stray visits, with William listening, and afterwards making thoughtful remarks with the Bunny bias clearly visible in their roll. Nina came to release her pent up nerves in a storm of "*Why* did you do it?" and "*How could* you?" His mother came, sat down on William's bed, and talked cheerily to Hal about various topics, with frequent pauses in which he felt her dumb push towards an assurance that she did not care "any old way" about that "silly old pound." And when Bunny entered, and just threw himself down moodily and glowered at William, Hal was so burdened by the atmosphere of criminal's cell, that he

suggested a tramp in the rain. Bunny's gaze of sheer horror conveyed clearly his reproof—"What—as though nothing had happened?" But he merely said: "You couldn't get out without meeting somebody or other—" so that Hal shrugged his shoulders, and remained where he was.

" . . . Shut up, William!" Bunny shouted presently, when William had not uttered a word, and refused to hear the youngster's righteous ex-postulations; and knocked over a tooth-glass, breaking it.

A knock at the door, and Stanley Watson came in: "Look here, Hal old chap, you mustn't think me interfering—"

"Oh Lord—" Bunny dived for the door. He had never agreed with Hal in thinking Stanley humorous; and a fourth statement of the bank clerk's point of view "which, just because he is *not* one of the family, we ought, by the law of common justice, to recognize before our own—" was more than his overwrought condition could stand.

Mr. Maxwell, who, alone of the family, could have remained secluded in his study, walked about the drawing-room, laboriously drawing his wife's attention to the fact that he was not paying any special heed to Aunt Lavvy; grumbling because the Watsons were "all over the dining-room"; and suggesting from time to time that Florrie had better run up and have a look at William, whose illness might be more serious than it visibly appeared. . . .

"I suppose you're trying to say I'm one to let my sons die and not care!"

Mr. Maxwell chose to regard the fact that she had "taken it like that"—his perfectly innocent remark—as significant of guilty memory. Had he been honest with himself, he would have acknowledged that he had scratched the memory of Ronnie into such an itching and inflamed condition that he simply could think and speak of nothing else, and that his remark about William had indeed been intended for wounding reminder. Like all jovial men, he had an especial talent for this.

"Our William is a particularly robust child. He cannot live less than ninety years. So I'm sure, Tom, that Florrie has no need to worry about him," said Aunt Lavvy, who, except on the subject of Hal and the bank and Mr. Fennimore's impending visit, was just as sweet and nice as she had ever been.

The midday dinner-gong sounded brazenly. And William, who felt better, appeared in a dressing-gown to ask if he might come down to dinner.

"I believe the little Busy-Gnomes have been in my room this morning," Aunt Lavvy smiled at Lottie, who quivered with pleasure up to the very bow at the crest of her head. For a blissful instant it seemed to her, as it had also seemed to Grace and Miss Roberts after "talking it over," that the problem was solved by dint of single effort.

But when the roast beef and apple-tart were over, and after the two servants had cleared away the

plates ready for fruit, and left the room, the master of the house startlingly got up and cleared his throat—"I want to say something to you all . . ."

He went on to suggest, into a circle of stricken silence, that it was Hal's duty to publicly apologize to their dear Aunt Lavvy for . . .

(Was he going to put it—actually—into words? . . . No, he couldn't! he couldn't! Ursula's breath was held back by an iron pressure of suspense.)

"——for the injury he has recently done her. Now, my son," genially not disowning him.

None of them had expected this. The upset had not yet been acknowledged in so many words as existent, except between groups of two or three. Now, in defiance of the sore atmosphere, it was thrown on to the dining-room table.

Mr. Maxwell's motive was to propitiate. The roast beef had stimulated his imagination; and while showing him more luridly than ever how dreadful would be the results to his own prestige, and to Hal's future, if Aunt Lavvy told the whole truth to Fennimore, it likewise suggested to him—falsely—that all the dear little lady wanted to appease her was probably a slight testimony to her importance in front of them all.

Hal, victim of the strategical error, had never dreamt he was to be trapped into active ignominy. It seemed to him, as it does to most people at one or another nightmare of their lives, that the moment was so awful that it simply could not really exist,

could not lead to another as bad. He heard himself stumble out a rather shaky: "Sorry, Aunt Lavvy, if I . . . if I . . ." then, fiercely self-despising, managed a gruffer, firmer voice, and stood up straight, pushing back his chair: "I'm sorry if I was a rotter to keep back that quid, Aunt Lavvy."

"If?" repeated Aunt Lavvy, sadly. "If? Oh, Hal!"

"I didn't mean 'if.' I just meant that I was sorry." He looked very white, and his forehead was damp with sweat. Even Stanley Watson pitied him in the pillory, and threw off a magnanimous:

"Oh, leave the boy alone now."

"I'm glad you realize what a serious matter a theft can be, my dear boy," said Aunt Lavvy, stretching out a plump hand for the fruit-dish, "but I don't want you to believe, though I've forgiven you personally, that either for my own sake or for the sake of the clerk at the Bank, I can do anything else but give Mr. Fennimore a clear, straightforward explanation, this evening, of what has happened. Honor Rose, look at this lovely plum your Aunt Lavvy is getting ready for you." But intention and time were clearly stated at last.

"Nina, d'you want my handkerchief?" proposed Lottie. "Oh no, you're laughing—I thought you were crying!"

"She *is* crying," William announced, with a certain stolid exuberance.

Nina, in fact, was in hysterics.

[XII]

OUTSIDE the dining-room door, Ursula and Hal became aware of each other—separately fled from the turmoil. They hesitated, self-conscious after what had passed.

"I suppose that sort of thing's not dangerous? She'll be all right, won't she?" Hal jerked his head in the direction of Nina's sobs.

"Oh Lord, yes. Some girls—not Nina's kind, though—often get hysterical."

"Do they?" Perhaps Hal wished that boys did, too. He walked slowly away upstairs. And Ursula, giving him time to disappear, rushed for her room, banged the door behind her and bolted it, all in one swift movement, as though she were desperately in escape from the ugliness she had left in the dining-room: Aunt Lavvy and Miss Roberts and Grace crowding round Nina's noisy agitation, admonishing her, thrusting forward remedies; Miss Roberts making futile dabs and sprinkles with the water-jug; Stanley trying to catch hold of Nina's wrists and saying with a stern note of authority the while: "You *must* be quiet. You *must* be quiet"—and, aside: "The one way to treat hysterics—if you'd only leave her to me!" Her mother upbraiding her father for having brought about the scene; Lottie's shrill: "May I fetch your salts, Aunt Lavvy? May I? Let me, or would you rather I didn't?" Honor Rose

frightened, and in tears; Mr. Maxwell's: "Can't you keep that kid of yours out of the way, Grace, when she's not wanted?" . . . The smell of roast beef. . . . A sudden clamour and concentration of hatred.

But up here, in her room, was refuge and loneliness and space. Ursula's grateful love for her room at that moment was so extreme that she longed to express it. It looked chilly and grey with the drops of rain dripping down the window, and falling dankly from the opposite drain-pipe of the next-door house. She suddenly determined that this was the moment for her first fire, her first *possession* of a fire. She would put it off no longer. From the little cupboard she brought sticks and newspaper and some small lumps of coal. It was a very tiny grate, and quite soon it was alight, with an exciting crackle of wood and spurts of flame. . . . Ursula crouched down in front of it, in dreamy ecstasy. Her gaze roamed about the familiar objects, so as to become acquainted with them in their new shimmer and glow. She sprang up and twitched the red curtains across the window, shutting out the disappointing wall beyond . . . you could so easily dream a perfect view, with the curtains drawn, and the room bewitched by warm flame. In future nights she would lie in bed hearing the red embers creak and flop, and more than ever she would be herself, owning herself, gravely exultant in self-possession. . . . Perhaps Mother and Father might give her for Christmas a small round clock-creature with a small round face and no hair—but

friendly. And then time would be privately hers, too, as well as space. For now she shared time with everybody else who could hear the striking hours from the big clock in the hall.

When the Maxwells stayed on the river near Cookham for one summer holiday, Ursula nosed about until she found a willow tree up a back-water, where the branches swept round her boat like a tent and enclosed it. When they went, as they usually did, to the seaside, she would discover for herself special places on the leeside of a deserted breakwater, or between hedge and tree-trunk in a corner of a field. Wherever she could find an equivalent for the room, she was happy. It was her funny instinct (and certain small animals have it, too) to burrow and squirm her way into some hedged-in space, and curl up with a sigh of content, naming it hers. Her romantic sense of property was, maybe, over-developed from the edged contrast of life in a family where the sense of property barely existed at all, and who only in a crisis, and then but dimly, felt the need for more room. In everything else she was more or less like the other Maxwells.

But—watch Ursula as she claims a privacy even so fleeting as an empty train compartment. Already, as the door slams on her before the platform has been well left behind, the rushing haven is intimately hers. She leans eagerly forward, hands clasped between her knees, and enjoys it—a slim girl in a rather pathetically skimpy navy-blue coat and

skirt, which always associates itself with the Ursula type of flapper, a dull, fair rope of hair falling over one shoulder, staid lips, pale as apple-blossom, curved in a slight smile of triumph, brows level above her softly thoughtful eyes. . . . Ursula! . . . She is not showy, but she may claim loveliness later on. There is a delicate artistry in the cut of her head and chin and neck, and in the brave square moulding of her eyelids. Ursula. . . . Not a musical name! She would have liked to be called Naomi or Rosalind or Pamela. . . .

Aunt Lavvy's cough and rustle on the other side of the locked door—and:

"I shall have to give up my room to her," thought Ursula, "so that she shan't tell old Fennimore to-night." And she knew that the necessity had been stammering up in her ever since, the evening before, Hal had looked at her across the dinner-table.

That was why she had slept uneasily; and why she had squatted so long motionless, and fiercely loving her solitude, in front of her first fire—her last fire.

People can only be bribed by something you are sure they want. And, except Ursula, nobody at the Laburnums could imagine, in this crisis, anything that Aunt Lavvy desperately wanted.

Aunt Lavvy wanted the little room next to her bedroom, for a sitting-room. She wanted to be able to say she had a suite—two rooms adjoining. She had wanted this with tranquil obduracy for several years

now. And Ursula, aware of it, had taunted the locked door between, with elvish dances and curtsyings.

At first the idea of bribing Aunt Lavvy with the room had occurred quite simply as an eleventh hour expedient to save Hal. But directly afterwards, Ursula saw her deed spring out in brilliantly illuminated letters, like the advertisements in Piccadilly Circus by night, as a Sacrifice.

And a Sacrifice, of course—if it be big enough—would make all the difference of colour and wind and enchantment to the days following it—days that would be as though they were of running liquid gold.

Ursula was tremendously excited by the prospect of Sacrifice. She had always dreamt how it would touch life with miraculous fingers, touch and transform it. Life that was hitherto all right, but only just all right, and not even vigorously wrong, humdrum and patchy and drab and lacking in power, a picture in muddy paint! Ursula held out her longing arms towards glamour. . . .

Sacrifice! And, after it had happened, everything different!

So the child made up her mind, gambling for splendour.

But it meant giving up the room. Giving up—room.

. . . That time—she was huddled on the floor again in front of the fire, one arm resting on the arm-chair's seat—that time a year ago, when Nina gave

a party; and she, with hair recently washed to fall in a loose shimmering cloud down her back, and wearing a new bluish-grey party-frock, graceful folds of pale soft satin, was so flushed and stimulated with the sudden achievement of real prettiness that she behaved as though she were a delicately intoxicated fairy—and laughed and talked as if it were *her* party, and gave orders, and tossed herself about, and was imperious, and a flirt, and a queen . . . until Nina said to her, when everybody had gone: “What *was* the matter with you, kid? Everybody was laughing at you; and that good-looking man whom Bobbie Mathers brought, told Bobbie you ran after him till he was afraid to stay. How could you make such a fool of yourself?”

The room had seen her through, then; had mercifully hidden her shame and her stung vanity and her hot disgust with herself. Supposing, though, that same evening of blunder were still to come, and no place for her to be alone in after Nina had said: “Everybody was laughing at you. . . .”

For a moment the memory was vivid again, and Ursula clenched her hands against the humiliation. Ambitious to be neither rich nor a genius, and scornful of sentimental slush, she had always hoped for fame as a hostess, a quaintly witty, worldly yet serene personality, who was an influence in a shining spacious atmosphere, where only supple minds and graceful figures were suffered. Her idea of the perfect setting in which to be serene and witty

was acres of parquet floor, and one little twisty gold and brocade sofa, and a sort of mellow amber light in it, and miniatures, and low, cool voices, and long, cool necks.

And when she tried—only just tried—to realize her conception of a Social Personality, Nina said . . .

The good-looking man whom Bobbie Mathers brought, did not figure distinctly in her aftermath of rage and shame. He was merely an indecipherable part of it. Men . . . they didn't count yet. Sometimes Ursula's imagination played games in which, queerly, she forsook her own part, and became a chivalrous ardent squire to one Ursula, touched up and ennobled, but in the main essentials herself. Narcissus and Narcissa. . . . It was good to be a male, a swashbuckler; and it seemed quite natural, as such, to fall in love with the demure grey-eyed Ursula. . . . "But you know your eyes aren't grey at all, they've got green and brown and blue, all mixed in. Once, in a storm off Lagos, I saw the hollow of the waves just that colour a second before they shattered over the deck. . . . God, I'd like to have had you there with me!"

And Ursula took this, how? But it was impossible to *be* Ursula as well as Ursula's lover. So the girl in the scene remained always objective, seen but not felt. She was sweet, but adamant, this Ursula, and elusive with some mysterious want he could not satisfy. The man wondered what it was; and "I wonder, too,"

reflected Ursula, puzzled, in her rôle of lover, by the subtleties of her own projection.

Games—but it was good-bye to them now! They would not play themselves elsewhere but alone in the room.

The summons to tea left her still crouching before her bowl of red fire. Tea!—if she as much as opened that door, all the widened feuds and jealousies and passions, pressing against the farther side, would tumble in. The door was a barricade. Who knows how much fresh horror had accumulated beyond it since dinner, or how many irretrievable blows newly dealt, or old injuries exhumed from burial?

Restraint was inside out. It might stop anywhere, or—it might never stop . . . since Nina had begun to be hysterical, and Aunt Lavvy proved an enemy, and Bunny was shockable, and Father was beastly to Mother, Mother starting such odd sentences that she nearly finished—but not quite—so that you caught your breath; and Mother hating Aunt Lavvy, and Grace huffy, and Gums and Stanley blacklegging from the Maxwell Union, and Nurse speaking her mind, and the servants a nudging community of gossip, and all the rooms chaotically surrendered for quarrel, and Hal morally in the dock. . . . Nobody kind, oh, nobody kind, and Mr. Fennimore expected tonight!

The blessing of being out of it! Ursula forgot, for the moment, that if she stuck to her purpose, solitude was already a fugitive with a price upon its

head. Revelling in the four quiet walls, she reached out an indolent hand for the crumpled sheet of newspaper in which to pick up more coal. She had no shovel.

It was last Sunday's paper. She glanced at it, after laying the coal in the shaking hollows of flame. Glanced . . . and then was absorbed.

From the cheap print, the lurid relishing headlines, the blurred semi-grotesque photographs of criminals, the whole sinister underworld came swarming up at her. Creatures who lived within reaching grasp of the law, creatures who crawled into the papers. . . . Subterranean folk, dwelling where gas hissed and cisterns dripped, and half-starved cats slunk through the gutter. And they had faces with swollen lips and large, fierce eyes, and their names were not the names of people one knew, and their clothes were unfamiliar. Their last incoherent letters were printed in neat, straight, passionless lines down the column. Something more complex than just "the poor"; a twilight more sinister, where drunken sexless figures dealt each other blows with, oddly, implements that were meant for homely use, pokers, and rolling-pins and chairs. In this stunted sallow underworld, boys and girls actually killed themselves in sudden rages of love and despair. And the inhabitants were hungrier than ordinary hunger. "Any previous conviction?" asked the magistrate. "Two against the woman Hobbs, Your Worship." . . . A world where women were known by their surnames to magistrate

and policeman and court missionary. . . . To Ursula it seemed as though into the room had drifted a raw fog, and beyond it the strident yell of newsboys. Over a barrow of rusty old garments, a row of naptha lights flapped uneasily . . . a lad furtively running was pursued by two policemen. . . . He was wanted for theft. . . . As, breathing hard, he padded round the corner, Ursula saw his face . . . Hal's face!

Hal had brought the underworld quite close to the Laburnums. He had done something which might—oh no! no!—which might get into the papers.

Wild with panic, Ursula scrambled to her feet. What time was it? How long had she been squatting there with that horrible beastly paper, reading it and imagining things. It was getting dark. Six—seven o'clock. And Mr. Fennimore came at eight. And Aunt Lavvy was going to tell him, and he might think it his duty—as Stanley would—to tell the police. And Hal . . .

It wasn't safe to wait a second longer. What had to be done was urgent. Without even a conscious glance of renunciation at her room, Ursula left it, and knocked at Aunt Lavvy's door.

"Come in."

With direct action, panic had vanished. She was confident now, and powerfully gentle, and even, with a tinting of irony, amused. Leaping ten or fifteen years of slow development to the grown-up Ursula she would undoubtedly become.

"Aunt Lavvy, I wondered if you would be a darling"—Aunt Lavvy, with a stiffening of her concealed obstinacies, waited for the plea for Hal—"and visit me in my room. You see, I've lit my first fire—you remember my birthday present?—and it seems silly to sit in front of it by oneself, and, well, it would be ever so jolly if you came in for a little while," with a rush of shy impulsiveness—calculated.

Aunt Lavvy beamed like a cluster of little pink and silver suns.

"Why, what a delightful surprise. The rain is so dreary, I was simply longing for firelight, but I had no idea an invitation was on its way."

"Then may I borrow one of your cushions?" Ursula was a spectacle of pretty, though rather childish excitement. She pulled Aunt Lavvy by the hand into the next-door room, and arranged her in the one armchair, and poked the smouldering coal to flames, and tugged at the window-curtains anew, and then settled herself with crossed legs, tailor-fashion, on the rag-mat on the opposite side of the hearth. She looked over at Aunt Lavvy with an air of affectionate content.

"It was lonely—till I brought you in," she said. "I sometimes wish I shared a room with somebody."

"This one would be too small, of course. But you've made it look so nice, Ursula dear."

"Have I? But you can't do much with a bed and dressing-table sticking themselves out. . . . It

ought really to be a sitting-room with a bedroom next door." And Ursula's gaze at Aunt Lavvy was full and pure and empty of all significance.

Aunt Lavvy reflected for a moment or two . . . and understood.

"Let's pretend, then," she suggested at last, her plump little mouth bent to a whimsical smile, "that I have been whisked away to Terra del Fuego on a broomstick, so that you are able to have my room for your bedroom, and could do as you liked with this one. How would you plan it?"

Aunt Lavvy might be a sweet-scented malignant little bundle of implacability, but she had to her credit a delightfully light and sensitive touch with the situation. Ursula, to whom clumsiness would have been unbearable in her own inspired mood of fine execution, appreciated the bland twist by which Aunt Lavvy had made it appear that *she* was to be the one eliminated from tenancy.

"Well—help me, then! I'd have the wallpapers that very deep cream tint that you're so fond of, Aunt Lavvy——"

"More primrose than cream," supplied Aunt Lavvy. "And wistaria cretonne curtains, Ursula, and the same on two armchairs, and a lot of cushions, mauve and blue and primrose-yellow. Wouldn't that be rather quaint and pretty?"

"And a bluey-mauve carpet, also the colour of wistaria." Ursula threw the same enthusiasm into these furnishings as though she were not intuitively

leading Aunt Lavvy on to describe exactly how, again and again, from the farther side of the door, she must have imagined Ursula's room furnished to her own private desires. The more these desires were allowed to escape and take form, the easier would she fall to the bribe . . . presently, when the time came to talk about Hal.

"And your lovely tea-set—Spode, isn't it? Would you bring that in here, and have shelves put up for it?"

"That wouldn't be very safe, would it? No, shelves for my books, and my low cupboard with the glass doors could be moved in for the china." Aunt Lavvy had forgotten that they were arranging the room for Ursula. "A primrose silk shade for the light, I think, and a small round table for pot-pourri. I wonder if my little davenport would fit slantwise across that corner recess near the window?"

"With a shade to match for the lamp, and a whole lot of mauve and yellow bowls and vases. Oh, there are such lots of flowers that would look too heavenly in here: violas and pansies and blue irises and primroses and larkspur and Michaelmas daisies—anything that isn't pink or red. Daffodils, of course—and cowslips. And your miniatures hung over the fireplace. . . . Aunt Lavvy, if you said nothing to Mr. Fennimore tonight, but explained to them at the Bank tomorrow that after all you had found the pound note loose at the bottom of your bag, I'm sure they'd believe you."

"Will you be quite frank with me, my dear child?" With a sudden tender seriousness, Aunt Lavvy set aside the irrelevancy of rooms and a room. She had her data now! "You really called me in here to plead for poor Hal."

"I'm not pleading, Aunt Lavvy," steadily.

"It's dreadful for me that you should all think me hard and unforgiving. Nina came to me last night——"

"Yes, I know. I suppose she was rude, and blurted things out."

"She hurt me," Aunt Lavvy confessed, with a little sigh. "And your mother, too. Ursula"—with a gesture of confidence—"you're a wise girl, and we've always been friends, haven't we? Do you see how unfair they are? I love Hal—but what am I to do?" She threw out her hands, and her diamond rings twinkled as the firelight burnished them.

Ursula comprehended that she *was* to plead, and so give Aunt Lavvy an excuse for "coming off her perch"—to borrow a phrase from Bunny. She accepted the cue for a sedate, sensible little sister, rather old-fashioned, a bit of a prig, perhaps. . . . Her hidden demon was doubled up with laughter!

"Wouldn't you say that Hal had been punished enough, Aunt Lavvy darling?"

After about ten minutes of parleying along these lines, Aunt Lavvy conceded that Hal's moral chastisement had indeed been severe. Quite suddenly she gave way, admitting, with the impulsiveness of a

contemporary, that she had longed to do so all along. . . . Her glance strayed to the niche beside the window, still not quite satisfied that it was wide enough for her davenport to stand there.

"And I'll move for good into Nina's room," said Ursula, speaking aloud the last line of their contract.

[XIII]

M R. FENNIMORE came that evening to the Laburnums, and Mr. Fennimore went. Aunt Lavvy did not betray Hal to him, though the Maxwells were taut with apprehension from minute to minute. After he had gone, Ursula privately informed her mother that she was henceforth going to share Nina's bedroom, and that Aunt Lavvy, in consideration of the gift of an adjoining sitting-room to her present apartment, would gloss the matter over with the Bank tomorrow.

"So Hal's all right, and I'm moving my things over so's to sleep with Nina tonight."

"But, darling," exclaimed Mrs. Maxwell, almost weeping with relief, "won't it do in the morning?"

"No, *tonight*," insisted Ursula, who had passed from the ageless wisdom of Medea, to a stage of crude and intensely youthful heroics, when it seemed urgent that her sacrifice should begin immediately, without the anti-climax of postponement. Because, beyond surrender of the room, and beyond suffering, lay that diffusion of gold over a grey world which

was to be her recognition from the gods. She knew that "Virtue is its own reward," must not be taken materially, in the sense that an automatic machine promptly doles out chocolate on insertion of a penny—(bent or battered coins not accepted); but—oh, surely she might count on *something* happening! "People would be different" . . . and she, too, would be different, conscious of a deepening of colour, a more vivid meaning, scents sharper and sweeter, all sounds harmonized, everywhere a lightness and a quickening up, less drag and shuffle, the same clean happy intoxication of spirit that can usually be won by actual high speed . . . by gallop on horseback over soft turf, or two-reefed sailing, or a race in one of those long lean cars that crouch low to the road.

In fact, Ursula's modest expectation demanded, in return for one room delivered, to dwell henceforth and continually in that state of jubilant ecstasy which may have come to our one or two really great poets for two or three minutes on completion of their three or four most perfect lines.

She moved into Nina's room that night. Nina helped her carry her things. And Mrs. Maxwell went to Mr. Maxwell—whom she found in his study, having a distinct row with his only son-in-law—and told him it was all right about Hal. And Stanley told Grace, who told Miss Roberts, who woke up Lottie to tell her. And Mr. Maxwell told Bunny, who told Hal. And everybody at the Laburnums

slept better that night, because of the news, except William, who had remained asleep and slept well in spite of it.

The next day, the effect of Ursula's act on the household was like a window flung open on to an enclosure where there had been a gas-escape. Gradually the fumes noticed the window and crept out and were dissipated.

Aunt Lavvy walked along the pleasant half-country road towards the shops of Buckler's Cross. And, passing the branch of Platt's Bank, dropped in, and told the clerk, leaning politely over the polished counter, that she had, after all, been the thief of that pound-note which he had missed on Saturday morning. She used the word "thief" whimsically, and the young man's amusement proved to her that certainly her name had not suffered from the incident. "At the bottom of my bag. They weren't pinned together, and it must have been the outside one. I collect so many bills and papers and letters loose in my bag—you men will always blame me for that. . . ." She dimpled at the bank-clerk, and handed him back the pound. And he thought what a delightful little old lady she was, and wished his mother, a large, gaunt and incredulous woman, were more in that style. He apologized for his own carelessness, and hoped she would not punish them by depositing elsewhere. They parted in the attitudes of a Marcus Stone picture. Then Aunt Lavvy went on into the town, and arranged with the local deco-

rators to paper her sitting-room at once, a deep cream with a wistaria frieze. Luckily, they were able to show her a sample of the latter in stock; but for her cretonne and carpet she knew she would have to take a day in London. Impulsively, she determined to go that very afternoon.

Mr. Maxwell and Stanley were, of course, at business. They were still resenting each other when they left the house; but before they reached the station, they had realized the flatness of disputing over a bank-clerk who, as far as the moral point at issue was concerned, no longer existed. But with regard to Mr. Maxwell's taunt that Stanley, if he wanted his own opinions, ought also to maintain his wife and child in his own home—Stanley left private injunctions with Grace . . . and she, too, was out most of the day. She did not tell Miss Roberts where, as she was afraid she had rather let herself go too much to poor Gums the last day or two, and it was not quite a nice thing to do, to grumble about your parents to the governess in their employ.

It was awfully sweet of Aunt Lavvy to put things right with the Bank, without involving Hal. And distinctly clever of Ursula, too, to think of offering her the room. It looked as though Ursula were going to be unselfish, "and that would be so nice for Mother when Nina marries, and I . . ."

Miss Roberts and Nurse resumed a courteous recognition of each other's claim to the nursery-schoolroom. Nurse said she was sorry if she'd

spoken too plain, and Miss Roberts understood that it *was* very irritating to come in with the babies and find the only table strong enough for the sewing-machine, littered up with lesson-books.

Nina, when they were dressing the next morning, asked Ursula suddenly and fiercely:

“What did you expect to get out of it?”

“Out of what?” Ursula, with the comb, swept her long hair to a veil in front of her face.

“Giving up your room. Look here, Ursula, squarely, between you and me, you must have meant to get something out of it. What?”

Ursula understood that if she disclaimed all hidden purpose of a benefit in the matter, there would be no other name for her than a prig, from the viewpoint of her sister and brothers. Simple nobility was indeed a completely priggish quality. Ursula felt ashamed. Even Bunny would censure her for it, in his soul. Even Hal, whom she had rescued. . . .

“Well, d’you suppose I was just ‘being good’ for its own sake?” scoffed Ursula, thereby thoroughly deserving to be termed traitor.

Nina nodded, placated. “Tell me, though?”

“It’s my business.”

“Something from Aunt Lavvy? From Dad? From Hal?”

Tiny green imps twinkled for a second in Ursula’s eyes. . . . Already Nina was mentioning Hal’s name with some of the old reverence. Already Nina was arrogant. . . . Ursula had not been to school herself,

but she had learnt enough from her brothers and sisters not to remind Nina of hysterics, though not enough to refrain from regret that decency should forbid such gentle reminder.

"Don't be a nuisance, Nina. I'll say what I like, and shut up when I like."

"You needn't think you can be as cheeky as you like, though, in this room. It was mine before you came to share it, so in a way I've given up as much as you."

Ursula turned, not an indignant scarlet as Nina expected, but white. Nina?—why, Nina had never cared about her room except to sleep in it, never minded how many visitors at the Laburnums overlapped her return home from her own visits, was quite content to have the shrine spoken of as the "spare-room" during her absence. Nina never fled to her room during trouble, she'd be just as content if her hockey group photographs and silver cups had their place anywhere else in the house. Oh, Ursula was sure—surer than sure—that the strange listening *growing* feeling never happened to Nina in solitude.

And now Nina was claiming an equal part in the sacrifice. . . . Put in that desperately reasonable way, it certainly had the appearance of being a half-and-half affair, but—would it truly look like that to—whoever attended to haphazard sacrifices which came drifting up from the world? Might Ursula not even say to herself that she, and no one else, re-

sponsible by seeing Hal in his lordliness, was also responsible for keeping him so?

For there was no damage done that would not be covered by the new skin even now growing thickly over his rawness.

Nina, with a last sturdy backward brush at her gleaming hair, swung to the door, ready for breakfast. She was careless and spruce and clear-cut as ever. Ursula remembered the days when she had worshipped her for these effects.

"I say, kid, I didn't mean half of what I said just now, so you needn't look so wretchedly serious. I rather appreciate having you in here, really. It's some one to talk to while I'm putting on my stockings. And it really was quite decent of you to fix things up with Aunt Lavvy—though, mind you, I don't believe she'd have told old Fennimore when it came to it. She was ruffled up the wrong way, but she's rather an old darling, and frightfully fond of Hal and the rest of us."

[XIV]

THE weather was not sufficiently self-conscious to clear up at precisely the same instant as the psychological clearing-up; but the day after, the sun flashed out, and the workman sang as he distempered Aunt Lavvy's sitting-room, and the carrier's boy whistled as he delivered her carpet and other packages from Whiteley's furnishing department.

And Hal and Nina and Bunny and Ursula and Maisie and Dorothy played their last tennis foursomes on the doctor's asphalt court, taking turns to be the two out, because on Wednesday the boys were due back at Winborough. Hal was a great deal easier in his mind when he discovered that the blend of Maisie and Michaelmas daisies—though she played a jolly good game, and of course the daisies were all right in their way—yet did not make a second attempt to play any incomprehensible wizard trick with him which had resulted in the bad dream of the week-end just over. He was not quite comfortable yet, though, with his family, and consoled by the prospect of Winborough, where nobody except Bunny knew anything about his downfall; and, a term after that, Oxford, where nobody at all would know. By Jove! Supposing Aunt Lavvy had kept her word, and had spread the whole hateful business all over the place. . . . It was clever of that kid Ursula to have thought of a way to bribe her. Decent of her, too . . . gratefully he served her with a soft ball, which she missed, because she was expecting a hard one.

Hal and Maisie won their set against Ursula and Bunny. Then Hal and Dorothy played Nina and Bunny, and again Hal and his partner won.

"Not one of you is any good at the net," he pronounced at last. "And you ought to practise your backhand shots, Dorothy."

Meanwhile, Aunt Lavvy and Florrie Maxwell, sitting by the French windows of the drawing-room,

open to the garden, were drifting into leisurely intimate talk . . . the children at tennis . . . the croquet they had played as girls . . . that odd man with the canary-silk waistcoat and the lively eyes who had wanted to marry Aunt Lavvy. . . . "D'you remember, Florrie, that picnic when I wore the rose-coloured dress which looked so awful near his waistcoat, and he couldn't understand why I ran away from him all day . . ." (and remembering, they giggled, two silly girls together). From the rose-coloured to other dresses . . . the present time, and what suited Nina, and what suited Ursula—not Grace, because the Decisive Dress which suited Grace had already been worn—the dress which first attracted her husband's attention. The "marrying mother" dies hard. "Mr. Barry Noyes once said that Ursula would be the beauty of the family; and really, I don't think men like fine girls as they used to . . ." and Tom's taste in women . . . and Tom . . . and—confidence finally unleashed—what Tom had brought up against her about poor little Ronnie!

And Florrie's unspoken penitence for each hard thought she had ever had of Lavvy, separated the gossip like commas and semi-colons and exclamation marks. Lavvy was so sympathetic. . . . And how delicious for two women, how invigorating yet soothing—the resemblance to cocoa is accidental! —the ripple backward and forward between them, on those certain subjects in which neither men nor girls nor young married women nor one's own hus-

band nor anybody but just that other woman, are in the least intelligent.

Tom Maxwell came home on Monday evening to an atmosphere a-quiver with a few memories and traces of the recent heavy storm, but otherwise peaceful, united, and, metaphorically, lit by quiet sunshine. He thought: "When a good row clears the air, it always proves the air needed it!" By Tuesday evening it occurred to him, however, that the air was not clear between himself and Florrie; and he remembered, as one with the difficulty of remembering a grotesque nightmare, that he had been amazingly hectic on the subject of a baby who had died of measles eleven years ago. He marvelled at his agitation, now limp to his proddings as a dead caterpillar. Had he actually charged Florrie with neglecting the kid? Preposterous!

"It isn't as though things didn't happen," blurted out Mr. Maxwell, bending over his trouser-press, to his wife already in bed. "And of course it stands to reason that if one could help them happening, one would. And, say what you like, to rear seven out of eight's not bad. My mother lost three in a family of five."

Florrie, understanding all that lay beyond the articulate apology, stretched out her hand towards her back view of him, and replied, after one or two happy gulps, "Lavvy and I had such a nice talk today while the children were out. It would be so dull for me here without her."

[XV]

A MONG her other purchases in London, Aunt Lavvy had bought Hal a beautiful fountain pen—value about twenty-five shillings—which she gave him on his return to Winborough for the Christmas term. Bunny she tipped ten shillings. But her gift to Hal proved, among a variety of subtle points, that it was not the *money* loss she had minded in the episode of the pound-note.

[XVI]

URSULA was just big enough to make a sacrifice, but not big enough to carry it off. For the first three or four days afterwards, she was able to behave gallantly enough, expectant of what Wordsworth, who had not, perhaps, a slender grace in titles, called “intimations of immortality”—but then, all at once, her belief snapped, and with it her patience, and she began to moon about the house in the spirit of a restive martyr who, after burning at the stake, has just discovered that the gates of heaven are only “cultured” pearl, and the streets an inferior rolled gold.

Then Aunt Lavvy remarked at breakfast one morning: “My little sitting-room is ready now, and it looks charming, but I’ve just remembered that there’s no key to the door between the two rooms. I must

send for Marks to have the lock fitted. Oh dear, and I had hoped I had done with workmen. They're such friendly dears, and *will* talk to me about the Government. Haven't you noticed, Tom, how sound I've been in my politics just lately?"

"Is the door locked, then?"

"Oh yes, it has been as long as I can remember. And the key lost."

Mrs. Maxwell said breezily: "Ursula, it's a topping day. It'd do you good to jump on your bike and pedal down to the town for Aunt Lavvy, before Miss Roberts is ready to study with you."

"Nina can go," suggested Ursula, hating the errand. "She's bursting with loving-kindness this morning."

"I'm going up by the eleven-forty to a matinée with Dorothy."

Mrs. Maxwell teased Ursula merrily for being a "lazy-bones." Stanley came in with a scientific fact about the stimulant of exercise just before mental concentration, together with statistics proving the large percentage of millionaires who had started their successful careers by living far enough from the station to entail a run for the train every morning. Mr. Maxwell waggishly remarked that, in that case, cooks ought to be bribed to serve the breakfast late; and Ursula said indolently: "Send Honor Rose to the locksmith's. She's got your steadfast sense of responsibility, Stan."

Grace cried: "At *her* age! Alone into Buckler's

Cross! You must be mad, Ursula. I sometimes let her toddle to the pillar-box at the corner, but——”

“Do let me go to the locksmith’s for you, Aunt Lavvy darling, directly Miss Roberts has finished with me. I’d love to.” The offer was Lottie’s.

“So as to miss your practising? What a brain!”

“Ursula, it’s right-down shabby of you to tease your sister because she’s more obliging than you are.”

Ursula flared up. “It wasn’t Lottie, was it, who gave up her room to Aunt Lavvy when she—when Hal——” She struggled with scalding tears at the back of the throat. Why do they always come hotter for injustice and self-pity than for sorrow?

Her hearers were startled and embarrassed beyond words at the reminder. They wanted to forget that episode, now that they were all united and kind and jovial again. It was indecent of Ursula to have hurled their obligation at them in this violent fashion, especially as there was no reply possible. They had all been grateful and thanked her. She could not exact gratitude twice over. Downcast eyelids and tightly-pressed mouths all round the table. . . . Of course she was only a child still, a charming undisciplined young colt, but even then——

The fact was that Ursula’s rather-more-than-usually-good deed had created a greater uneasiness among the Maxwells than Hal’s rather-more-than-bad deed which had preceded it. A thoroughly average family is not accustomed to either extension from the normal.

Both Hal and Ursula were disturbingly "different." Hal's moral lapse had rapidly developed into a problem of consequences, which had been as rapidly wiped out, leaving next to nothing of the original shock. And then he had gone back to school. . . . Somehow, it was all not so uncomfortably evident as the sight of Ursula round the house, a disconsolate moping Peri emphasizing her yielded Paradise. For if she could be as noble as all that, she might at any moment be equally noble, or nobler. And the rest of them would have to live up to it, or else feel inferior.

So that Hal, who could be forgiven, and who was eager to forget, was easily a more popular figure than Ursula, who had been their rescuer, and now prevented them from forgetting.

"But I shall enjoy a walk to Marks, to see about a new key." Aunt Lavvy broke the silence. "The hedges are just beginning to turn colour all along the road. It's my favourite season."

Ursula had dashed out of the room, they all thought, in tears . . . but presently she came back like a gale, and flung a small heavy object on to the breakfast-table.

"There's your key," defiantly.

"The key of the door between?" Aunt Lavvy picked it up. "You clever child! Where did you find it?"

"I didn't find it. I had hidden it—at the bottom of my handkerchief-box."

"You had hidden it? And why, pray?" demanded her father.

Ursula thrust her hands into the pockets of her jersey, and tilted back her head. She was not crying now—indeed, there was urchin rougery sparkling in her eyes, and the corners of her lips were enigmatic:

"To protect myself from visitors," she replied sweetly.

"Plain speech is a short cut," said Tom Maxwell, getting angry with this young daughter, who, from being more or less of a cipher, had dared first to place him under an obligation, and then to taunt his helplessness with insubordination.

"Well, then"—Ursula spoke with even greater sweetness—"to protect myself from our Paying Guest."

[XVII]

BUT in spite of these impertinences, Aunt Lavvy had the room, and Aunt Lavvy had the laugh of her. Moreover, now that the room was completely ready to sit in, and charming in its lilac and primrose tints as when their imaginations had planned it together, Aunt Lavvy did not sit in it. She sat downstairs with the others. She was more than usually convivial, and fragrant with content when somebody—Mrs. Maxwell or Nina or Lottie or Miss Roberts—asserted playfully that she could not be spared from them to go and sit in solitude.

Tenacious in her desire to own a sitting-room, it now stood empty and unused in that packed house.

Ursula, moping homeless about the stairs and landings of her home, was conscious of that sequestered oblong of space as though it were alive. She infected the rest of the household, who also became conscious of it—and, more than ever, of her. One or the other of them was wont to say to her, guiltily off-hand: “Oh, by the way, Ursula, there’s nobody in the dining-room for half an hour, if you want to be alone. I looked in on my way up,” and “Then I’ll tell Minnie not to disturb you.” . . . And behold Ursula, mooching disconsolately round the dining-room, a conspicuous captive to the misapprehension that she “liked to be alone sometimes.”

“Look here,” Mr. Maxwell anxiously consulted his wife one evening. “What’s all this trouble about Ursula? I mean, she’s quite comfortable digging-in with Nina, isn’t she? Sisters, and all that. What’s she in such a deuced queer state about ever since—Damn it, it was the girl’s own suggestion to change rooms.”

“Nina’s much easier to understand than Ursula. Nina’s much more like me—hot-tempered and says right out what’s in her mind and then it’s all over.”

For it is a pet illusion with most people that they have exactly this popular sort of temper, and no other.

Her husband drew closer. “Look here, Florrie. Hadn’t you better have a quiet talk with Ursula. A serious talk. You’re the girl’s mother. Get her

to confide in you. I dunno—but it doesn't seem . . . natural to me, this fuss about not sleeping alone. Was there anything wrong going on when she—Well, what do you think?"

His suggestion of an interview with Ursula in the spirit of "you're the girl's mother" was a parallel to his serious talk with Hal—"After all, I'm your father." . . . Thus, twice in the last week or two, parenthood had ceased to be nominal.

"What do you think, Florrie?" He had been nice to her ever since their reconciliation, and especially nice in insisting on her prior right to be consulted and even listened to with deference, on all subjects connected with the children.

Mrs. Maxwell said slowly: "Yes—I'll talk to Ursula. But I think I know. . . . A sort of shyness—some girls are like that. Oh, *I* wasn't—not *I*!" and she laughed heartily.

"Look here, Ursula, my dear"—it was always easiest to approach a significant interview with "look here"—"I'm not going to mince words with you. If the trouble is that you don't like undressing right down in front of Nina, because you're not used to it—well, it's false modesty, my dear, that's what it is, but you can't help your feelings." And, very red in the face, but determined not to be put off either from her theory or her remedy, she described how Ursula could put on her nightgown over all her under-clothes, and undress decently beneath it, manœuvring

unseen knots and buttons until each garment flapped from concealment on to the floor; and, in the same way, could dress completely underneath her night-gown, and then only take it off—"It's just a knack, and you're not clumsy, so with a bit of practice—though, mind you, Ursula, you may say I'm too broad-minded, but it's better than being morbid, which you are when you act as though your body's something to be ashamed of."

"Darling Mummie, I don't care twopence if Nina or anybody else sees me stark naked."

Florrie Maxwell collapsed on to the ledge of the landing-window. For though the Laburnums was now in its wonted pleasant humour, it still gave father the advantage of a study for "serious talks" with his offspring, and left mother to be despised for her less successful efforts in the uncertain privacy of the landings or the stairs.

Mrs. Maxwell was annoyed with Ursula. She had enjoyed being broad-minded and advanced, in a wind-on-the-open-heath voice, to a prim, shy, absurd little daughter . . . but Ursula's "stark naked" had at once reversed their positions, and discouragingly forced her back into the distasteful attitude of a slightly shocked parent. . . . For why "stark" naked? "Stark" nakedness contains an impropriety beyond the mere heartiness of a body unclothed.

"Then if it's not that that's upsetting you, what is it?" bluntly.

Ursula became impenetrable. Oh, Nina with her

"What did you hope to get out of it?" and now the grown-ups with "Why do you mind not sleeping alone?" hinting at—Ursula did not know what they were hinting at; and nor, as a matter of course, did they, except for an uneasy conviction that it was unnatural.

But Aunt Lavvy understood. That was what so exasperated Ursula. Of all of them, Aunt Lavvy, who did not belong to them, who did not love them (not really), and who was, moreover, her enemy, should alone possess subtle mastery of whatever situation arose at the Laburnums. She did not *want* to be understood by Aunt Lavvy. But in truth she was, and to herself she owned it.

When—when would it begin . . . the glorious transformation of the commonplace, reward of sacrifice? Would it never begin? Not today? Not tomorrow? If there were any place to cry and cry and cry out the fulness of her heart and the tightness of her throat, the disappointment might not press so heavily. The room had been a lovely place to cry in.

[XVIII]

"**S**HE'D be best at boarding-school," said Mr. Maxwell one evening in the drawing-room, after Ursula had gone to bed.

His wife and Aunt Lavvy and Grace and Nina and

Stanley and Miss Roberts all agreed. Grace, because she had liked school, and was sure Ursula would like it, and had always pitied her for being cheated of it; Nina, because she honestly believed it would supply some qualities lacking in her young sister—sporting Winborough qualities; Miss Roberts, because Ursula was growing beyond her in temperament, intelligence and impertinence—and anyway, Lottie would suffice to keep her in employment until Honor Rose was old enough to require a governess; and Aunt Lavvy for a reason dissimilar to Grace's, and also from a feeling not dissimilar to Ursula's—that she disliked a presence at the Laburnums that understood where it did not love her. But the main reason for agreement with all of them was not mentioned; that it was impossible for the scar of recent conflict to be properly healed, or for the Laburnums to settle down to its former complacency, while the main reminder of the unusual was still in the house—reminding them. Metaphorically, they still twitched their shoulders when Ursula was about. Ursula was a dear, quaint kid, but—when people took to sacrifices you could never be sure what would be their next out-of-the-way freak. Something higher, nobler still perhaps, and even more uncomfortable. . . . They did not see that there was nothing to be frightened of in poor little Ursula, who was just not big enough to carry it off. If, indeed, she had followed up her lapse from the average by letting them all forget it—ah, then their spirits might well have

been awed by the sudden distance separating her from the rest of them.

"I'll go and see Miss Luther tomorrow," said Florrie Maxwell. "As you say, Nina, the term will have started, but it's too long to wait for the half-term, so perhaps they'll make an exception, as you and Grace were there, and let her enter at once."

Then Stanley broke it to them. "I may as well tell you now, Mother and Father"—he only called them thus when on the brink of some significant announcement—"that I've been negotiating for the remainder of the lease of 'The Kopje'—we shan't call it that, naturally. Old Gurney wants to move out at once; it's too small for him. I think it's fairly certain that we'll get it. It's time Grace and the babies had the run of their own house; and, quite frankly, sir"—turning with good-humour to his father-in-law—"from something you said to me the other day, I gathered you'd prefer it."

"Well, well." Mr. Maxwell remembered with regret that he had been irritable in the matter. "Perhaps we are rather tumbling over each other's toes in the old Laburnums. And as long as you're still in the same road—we can't let our grandchildren go too far away, can we, mother?"

Mrs. Maxwell nodded absently, for her thoughts were already bustling about the rooms, re-arranging them. It really seemed as though the sudden exodus would be like releasing a spring, and that they would all reel out into spaciousness, rather crumpled and

breathless from having been packed so close. Lottie and Miss Roberts could now have an undisputed schoolroom, and also move down into their old bedroom, where Nurse and the Watson babies had been sleeping. Because an attic was much more suitable for boys—she had always known it, and if Hal were going to college next year, that was the signal that he was grown-up—her grown-up son!—and ought to have a room to himself. Bunny and William would be perfectly happy, rampaging about the attic. And Mrs. Maxwell realized with pride that at last they would actually be able to boast a spare-room, at present Grace and Stanley's bedroom. “And that makes Nina's room much more hers as well—I must say she's been very good about visitors in it—but now she won't be plagued except during Ursula's holidays. And the spare-room will do splendidly if Hal wants to bring home his college pals.”

[XIX]

MISS Luther, headmistress of Regina Hall, Tunbridge Wells, had just said good-bye to Mrs. Maxwell; and was discussing the prospective new pupil with Miss Greylings, her second in command:

“Her sisters were both thoroughly nice girls, and Nina, I remember, was one of our best hockey captains. But there seems to be something mysterious about this one—Ursula. At all events, they're in a

special hurry to get rid of her. As far as I can gather from the mother's manner, she had got herself into some sort of a scrape at home. . . .”

[XX]

THINGS were not different after a sacrifice. Things were exactly the same—only horrider. Ursula knew now.

The taxi sprang away from the open front door of the Laburnums. Sitting on a back seat, she was able to see, through the rain-blurred windows, her mother in the porch, and Aunt Lavvy and Lottie. . . . They drew in out of the wet, their last smiles still encouraging her with the formula: “You’ll love it when the first homesickness is over.”

Nina and Grace were taking her down, both eager for a glimpse of their old school.

Ursula’s beautiful mouth was set and grave, her eyelids downcast, her hands, as usual, clenched in the deep pockets of her coat. It was simply not worth while to be good. At Regina Hall would be dozens of girls, eating, working, sleeping together. Herded even in thought. There would be confidences and slop and brimming-over affection. . . . “Oh, a mess of girls!”

But after all, Hal was all right. She had given him back to the world as a complete specimen of hero—a careless, lordly, invulnerable being, good-natured, with a voice of lazy authority. Anything so

complete was surely precious, though it was said that only suffering and humiliation enriched the soul . . . but so many people with doubtlessly enriched souls, yet dragged about, to all appearances maimed and burdened and spoilt. So might not an occasional Hal remain splendidly poised, neither fretted by consciousness, nor torn by imagination? And Ursula had achieved that for him. She had power. There was sudden dazzlement in the thought. . . . She lifted her head proudly. . . . To have secret vision, and to act on it, swiftly, clearly, successfully . . . why, she was almost God!

The luminous moment was swept into grey commonplace again, and only a disconsolate little girl in a taxi was on her way to the station.

But she broke into a happy gurgle of laughter, remembering how Lottie had tried to deal with the situation by arranging pins in a pattern on Aunt Lavvy's cushion.

PART II
“DOUG”

[I]

URSULA'S husband waited for her to speak. But she laughed instead. Just a low, thrilled, secret little laugh, very peculiarly hers. It made Doug uncomfortable. Because by all the laws of commonplace she ought to have been working up for a scene. And he was quite ready to call himself a despicable brute, and had taken off his coat to do so—he always felt bigger and more virile and primitive in his shirt sleeves, than in a sober dinner-jacket. Doug Barrison had roughed it so much, that, metaphorically, he still swung a perpetual axe with which to build a log cabin for his woman.

"By God, Teddy, it's hot tonight. I'd like—I'd like to be beating down the Channel, with the deck lifting and straining under my feet."

She dismissed the deck as momentarily unimportant. "Doug——"

He sat on the edge of the bed; it creaked under his weight. Ursula leant back against the pillows, hands clasped behind her head.

"If I were you, and you were me, what would you do about it, Doug?"

"I've been a vile, hulking, despicable brute," he began.

"Oh, no, dear, nothing as powerful as that. Because you can't help it, can you?"

"Not in this world full of girls," he confessed, with sudden understanding that she understood.

How mischievously attractive she was, with that wise little smile flickering round her lips, and her profound mermaid eyes. Teddy—Ursula—his teddy-bear—the nickname was obvious. She was so much more to him than Monica and Kate and—and Doreen—oh, all the procession!

But his flirtation with Doreen ended tonight by the sudden—and, he must admit it, sensible action of the girl's parents. They had simply left the boarding-house during the day, while he was doing his duty as Secretary to the Knapsack Club. Ursula had broken the news to him while they were dressing for dinner.

"And play up to me at dinner, Doug, and afterwards. All those hateful intimate *strangers* looking on, and they've nothing else to be excited about, most of them."

He knew she detested the boarding-house. They had only moved into it when the seven years' lease of their flat had expired, while they had hunted for another. But somehow the hunting had become desultory. Doug declared that he did not want to anchor himself again; the old rover mood was once more upon him—so they had stayed for nearly twelve months at the boarding-house. For presently had come Doreen Jones, and he had talked to her about

the glorious adventure of having no anchorage, but obeying an invisible call to the South Seas or to Persia, just the very instant it sounded. He talked to her—as, perhaps, he had once talked to the little schoolgirl Ursula Maxwell.

His own sister, Gwen, was at Regina Hall with Ursula, and had coaxed her big brother, just home from a trip to Chili, to come to the annual fancy-dress dance. Among the cowgirls, Pierrettes and Dutch peasants, was a glowing, radiant Cinderella, in faded rags certainly, and carrying a broom, but behaving with a wild abandon very far from the original modest and obedient maiden of the fairy-tale. Ursula, indeed, was wildly over-excited. Tonight, at any rate, she would retrieve the humiliation of her one previous attempt to “sparkle in the throng” . . . Tonight there was no question of making a fool of herself, even had Nina been there to say so. Success was like a rush of wine in her blood; she danced—well, Miss Luther had frequently to speak a few low, restraining words in her ear. The other girls swarmed round her, begging to introduce their brothers and cousins. Each hair of the gold which tumbled over her shoulders and down her back seemed to stand out and quiver with a separate vitality. There was no reason for all this—except for the stinging remembrance that she had come to the last day of her last term, and tomorrow . . . she would be going back home, back to the Laburnums for good, to share a bedroom with Nina

and sit at table with the family and Aunt Lavvy and Gums; with Aunt Lavvy and Gums and the family. . . . And she had never been popular with them since that unfortunate affair of the room.

[II]

SCHOOL, after the first hot indignation, had proved not so bad. It was a simple and more impersonal matter to share with a dozen than with one. Besides, expecting an atmosphere like warm clinging toffee, sweet and sentimental and tenacious, she had found instead a community of off-hand young women, encouraged by their mistresses to strive for fitness, hygiene and efficiency—a collection of embryo Ninas, in fact. Ursula adapted herself swiftly to these conditions, glad that too cloying intimacy was “not done.” She was not by any means the Favourite of the School nor the Queen of the Upper Fifth. . . . The night of the fancy-dress ball was the first time she was ever conspicuous at Miss Luther’s. When Douglas Barrison saw her again, she was sedate in navy blue and a white flannel shirt; Gwen’s little friend on a week’s visit to the house; very shy and unimportant; hair in a “door-knocker.” “Yes, thank you, Mr. Barrison, I enjoyed the dance very much——”

But no repetition of wild and vivid behaviour would have fascinated him like this sudden baffling change and withdrawal.

He won her on scenery, mainly. Big lonely romantic scenery. Wide Pacific seas, the Southern Cross overhead. . . . She thought he found difficulty in talking about it all—“Civilization’s all right—but sometimes a man feels he wants to be up against things . . . to sleep on a bed of fern or the hard earth itself—”

When Doug stayed overnight with friends, he would nearly always, with his peculiarly jolly, open-air laugh, reject the comforts of the spare room. “Oh, I’m an old campaigner. . . . I can turn in anywhere . . . on the floor—in a barn. Once, I remember, I slept—”

His sufferings when he wore a collar and trousers and such ordinary European raiment, and his relief when he could cast them off, seemed almost disproportionately exaggerated. “A loose shirt and a pair of old shorts’ll do me any time, thank you.”

He liked makeshifts in the midst of civilization: to find a door locked so that he had to enter by a window, genuinely pleased him. It was so virile. A row was virile, too. . . . It was disappointing to pugnacity when coal-heavers, navvys and bargees were civil.

Was he a romantic, then? Well . . . a dependent romantic, dependent upon his setting. He could understand how a traveller, staying in safe, prosy, comfortable London because his old mother wanted him, would chafe and get restless for hard winds and bare horizons and the hot-coloured East.

But a retired grocer fretful for his cheeses and balls of string again—"Not much romance about cheese, is there? What beats me, is how the poor little chap stuck to trade all those years. I'd have broken away. . . ." it was a constant miracle to Doug, how few people did indeed by their bodies break away. The spirit which had broken away was invisible to him. It may have been by sheer luck that Douglas Barrison was tanned and hard-bitten, or it may have been that his desire for this type of looks was powerful enough to achieve them. Tall, burly—he would have preferred to be lean, though!—his hearty boyish voice contradicting a certain remote sadness in his deep-set eyes; hard brown skin and even a small white scar . . . no wonder he impressed Ursula romantically. Ursula, at eighteen, was a baby still, proud that her notions of romance swung with free steps past the pale sentimentalities of an earlier generation of schoolgirls. Her definition of a man—after she had met Doug—was a massive and inarticulate being, who would rather be cold than warm, rather fighting than lapped in unperilous peace.

They confided in each other a craving for loneliness and adventure. "You're the first girl I've met who understood all that. God, if I had you in . . ." he became geographical.

"Four corners to my bed,
Four angels round my head——"

De Vere Stacpoole, Robert Service, Jack London

and Joseph Conrad were the four angels who ought to be grouped round the bed in any symbolic representation of Doug. Not that he ever read them much; big, simple, rolling-stone sort of men read their Bible and perhaps Shakespeare. They seem to find Shakespeare easy reading, even scenes in which the Fool makes conversation.

Ursula was not fond of reading, either. So that their courtship did not include enthusiastic quotations and miraculous discovery of mutual favourites.

Instead, he planned a love-scene in every setting that captivated by its distance from the actual verandah of the Barrison home. . . . And yet, it was not such a bad verandah. He won Ursula on scenery, and on his restlessness which leapt to hers and exultantly joined hands with it. Now they had been married eight years, and all their journeyings had been for “holidays,” Easter and Summer, tethered at one end by Pall Mall and the Knapsack Club. Doug liked his genial post as secretary there; the careless come and go; a drink with a fellow just back from Tibet, a chat with another over his plans for a toddle into the Amazon region—“Lucky devil, wish I could come with you!” from Doug.

Mind you, Doug did not pose as one of the world’s wayfarers, without justification. He *had* travelled, quite a lot, and beyond the ordinary tourist zone. And he had enjoyed it, too, though his relish for discomfort multiplied enormously in retrospect. No other post but secretary to the Knapsack would have

held him faithful. But at the Knapsack he could absorb daily all his favourite atmosphere of travel—the talk of routes and equipments, the fantastic anecdotes, the society of the right sort of men, thin, cheerful, leathery fellows; without yielding his regular salary, his duties to his mother, or the pleasures of London, three meals a day, electric light, telephone and taxis. His qualifications of good temper, good breeding and competence made him popular with the members of the Club. It was travelling by proxy, certainly, and many evenings he came home to Ursula in the “break-away and be damned to my salary and this damned monotonous safety” mood . . . but Ursula was always a little bit too ready to assent and encourage him and dare an uncharted future. She was eager for pain and horror, the tragedy of making mistakes—all the perils along the road that might break in sudden dazzle and glory. She was eager only to go and not to stay—never to stay. But Doug was very young at all his ages, and his resolutions needed resistance, as a puppy’s teeth need bone if they are to sharpen effectively.

Presently his performance of a stern, rugged spirit clenched against the call of lagoons and mountains and bronchos, the lure of the Far East and the Far West and small animal-whimpers through primeval forests at night—were played to other audiences than Ursula; audiences who would not say: “Oh yes, let’s!”—audiences of Monica and Kitty and—and Doreen.

Nobody, not even Doug himself, had thought it worth while to warn little schoolgirl Ursula from loving and marrying a man who was beyond everything else, and beyond laughter and tears, and beyond cure, susceptible. Monstrously, grotesquely susceptible.

Being married made him more susceptible than before, because it gave him a reason why he must not be—a reason with hard bone in it. Lord! how he renounced them, Monica and Kitty and—no, not Doreen; he was just going to renounce her, when her people took her away from the boarding-house, which was disconcerting. How he began to tell them about lagoons, etc., and where he would like to take them—and then abruptly was silent, mouth set, jaw squared, but blue eyes still narrowed and dreamy with inward vision of two tiny figures alone together in the Sudan or on a coral island. . . . “Look here, my dear, shut me up when I get talking . . . like this. It isn’t good for either of us. I’m getting soft, that’s the trouble. But for a man to know eternally where his next meal’s coming from—He ought to sling it home on his shoulders, while his mate——”

“Hush, Doug—we mustn’t.”

“No. We mustn’t. Give us this day our daily round. . . . Don’t you ever get sick for freedom? To chuck the whole code and get away . . . ride away” (when it wasn’t the ship and the straining deck!). “Oh—riding—the steady thud and gallop

of your horse's feet under you, miles and miles and miles. . . .”

And so Doug went on for miles and miles and miles. And years and years and years.

[III]

TILL now, at last, he and Ursula were talking about it. It was amazing to Doug that she did not cry, and cling to him, and attempt to win a promise of no more Doreens. He said so.

“Dear old boy, I’ve learnt from King Canute that I may sit in a chair and forbid the waves to wet my feet, and they’ll blandly roll up all the same. No more Doreens? There will be dozens of Doreens. Dozens—and I love you. What am I to do about it, Doug? Can you suggest anything?”

“Let’s go away, then—where there are no waves—no Doreens. Darling—you take matches away from a child, because he’s not to be trusted. I’m a child. Take the matches away from me. Take me away from the matches.” He was speaking honestly now.

“Animal, vegetable, mineral,” murmured Ursula—“Doreen, waves, matches. Never mind. We can’t cut clean away from things as they are, unless you give up the Knapsack, Doug.”

“I’ve been wanting to for a long time”—two and a half minutes precisely. “I’m getting much too fat and contented.” He strolled to the looking-glass,

humming: “Put me on an island where the girls are few!”—“Yes, I’m in rotten condition. Look at this arm. I’ll hand in my resignation tomorrow. I expect they’ll get up a subscription for a present, as I’ve been there so long. Mr. Garrison all unobservant as the list goes round! I’m rather keen on a decent pocket-flash. Useful when I’m riding round to have a look at the crops.”

“Dear, we’re not going into the Bush, are we?”

“We’re going to the other end of nowhere!” shouted Doug, swinging out his arm and hitting it against the bed-post. “We’re buccaneers—soldiers of fortune. The horizon . . . how it pulls and pulls——”

“And beyond it, the warm dim lagoons, where a man and a woman can bathe their hot bodies, naked and unashamed,” Ursula reeled off with wicked fluency. “God—and the maddening smell of the hibiscus blossom in the blue night air. Why does any one stay this side of the Equator, I wonder? Just wait till you see the Southern Cross flaming above our heads—I’ve been pent up long enough. Oh, I’m talking damned rot, perhaps, but convention—it’s nothing but a strait-waistcoat. Let’s burst it and be off! I want to show you the warm dim lagoons——” Ursula broke off from imitation “And here the same tune comes round again on the barrel-organ,” she finished, in her soft, sedate fashion.

Doug was staring at her, bewildered as a puppy before whom a mirror is held up.

"Don't you want to go to the tropics?"

"They're so—tropical," sighed Ursula. "Insects and miasma."

"North-West, then? Canada? It'll be a new land to me——"

"Doug-land! cowboy sombreros and log-cabins and biting blizzards and leagues of glittering white snow . . . the red fox . . . or is it the Red Indian? Never mind, we needn't be accurate in Doug-land!"

Her husband remained good-tempered. Good temper under provocation was, indeed, one of his attractions: "I can't quite get the hang of that. But it looks as though any place I took you to would be Doug-land, as you call it."

"It would. Oh, it would."

"Ursula—aren't we going to break away, then? by ourselves? to the back of nowhere?"

"We needn't be quite so drastic, nor so picturesque about it, that's all." She sank to a more serious note: "We mustn't be more than a day's journey away from your mother, Doug, for the next few years. . . . Remember what the doctor told you about her heart."

He nodded, contrite.

"Poor old Mater. England, then. How far can we trek from mankind. Jove—trekking—I'd like to have swept you off to a farm on the Transvaal, Teddy!"

"Grey felt sombrero exchanged for flopping straw,

the same loose shirt as we used in the tropics and in Canada; patient lumbering oxen responsive to the slightest crack of your sjambok . . . ”

“I don’t see why we shouldn’t farm in the west of England,” reflected Doug; “there’d be moors and the sea and good rich soil—I’d have to look round a bit first and find my feet. My oath, it’s a topping notion of yours, Teddy. I’ve always been keen on farming, deep down. Good-bye to the artificial life and hurrah for Arcadia!”

“Doug, are there no Doreens in Arcadia?”

“Rustics, farm-girls. No, they don’t appeal to me. Honestly. It’s girls of our own class, with dainty minds and dainty bodies who are fatal. It’s queer, you know”—Doug was engrossed in the subject of his ego; and Ursula listened attentively, thinking that out of all his innocent misconceptions of himself, she might yet pick up an essential hint or two; “it’s queer that though I’m a primitive man, primitive to the very spine, yet the type of opposite sex that—that upset me, is delicate and puzzling and highly-finished—you don’t meet ‘em often away from towns. Isn’t it queer, Ursula?”

She nodded absently, her mind a-swing upon some tiny thread of its own. “I don’t want to be a beast—and I don’t want to nag—but, Doug, if we go and live in the country, away from temptation, it’s *not* just for a change and a jolly adventure. It’s because I’m desperate. I don’t look it, I know, and I don’t behave like it, but I’m desperate all the same. Do you really

want to be cured, Doug? I won't force the experiment on you. I'm the last creature who ought to do that—I'm personally too much interested. But austerity isn't half as romantic as you're imagining it now. You're still thinking about the hunting-flask. . . ."

"No, I'm not. Anyway, they'll most likely fork out with a cigarette-case instead. And I've got three already. Teddy darling, I solemnly swear I want to be cured. I *mean* to be cured. I owe you that. We'll be all-in-all to each other, down in the country. Pretty desolate in winter, I expect . . . all the better, cold and rain sharpen you up like blazes. I'm fed up with town people and their sallow, dingy faces. They're helpless; they're afraid, they're hemmed in——"

His voice became resonant; and the old couple in the adjoining bedroom thumped the wall in peevish protest.

"Right!" said Doug, glaring at them through the paper and plaster and match-boarding, and highly pleased at this timely illustration to his arguments. "Right! Thump away! We're off! We've done with being herded and packed. We're going to where a fellow can bellow his lungs inside out at whatever time of night he pleases. You know, Teddy, the root of the trouble is, that living in town has made us too complex. If that old hag and her husband loved us, in the simple country fashion—love is really a very simple thing, Teddy," and Doug's voice was a

little deeper than usual as he came to this conclusion.

“But surely it *is* a fairly simple thing, to bang at the wall when your neighbours are noisy at midnight. Mr. and Mrs. Cox would be far more complex if they loved us for it!”

Mr. and Mrs. Cox thumped again, urgently.

“Oh, be —— Teddy, why have we put up so long with this slummy dosshouse, that’s what I want to know?”

But Ursula was silent, thinking that enough had been said about Doreen, who had only left that day.

She did not sleep at once, but persistently chased the wheeling thought: “Will it be any good?” It was not that she wanted Doug to feel their future isolation as punishment—discipline—not with any such priggish quality attached to it. But his innocently chubby view of the idea as a jolly, buccaneering adventure, with shouts and banners—it was so exasperatingly like putting a naughty child to bed, only to see him at once rig up a tent with the sheets, and begin to play.

“Doug——”

“Wha’?”

Ursula recognized that he was too nearly asleep for further psychological discussion. And, after all, if she was cast for heroine of his latest muscular romance, was it not better than the grimmer rôle of chastiser to a penitent. So——

“Doug, I *am* longing for . . . Arcadia.”

His arm strayed out at random, and lay heavily, possessively across her throat. . . . "Darling . . . so glad . . . thought you'd come round to the idea. . . . And we'll be able to keep a dog in the country. . . .

PART III
“ARCADIA—MORE OR LESS”

I

MR. WRIGHT made sure, with a quick look, that the shop door leading back to the parlour, was closed. Then he leant across the counter to Ursula, and in low confidential tones, scornfully tolerant, enlightened her as to the true character of St. Miniot, its inhabitants and its history. Mr. Wright kept the general shop which was not also the post office, in opposition to Mr. Sampson's general shop—which was.

Mr. Wright was not a native of the place; he was indeed a very superior man, preoccupied with care lest a stranger, such as Ursula, should not take note of this superiority within the first five minutes' intercourse. He had a short pointed beard and wise eyes; he spoke consciously good English; he had once kept a store in Sydney, and he behaved entirely as though life were a delicate mission entrusted to him by a celestial Diplomatic Service, who had selected him for his special gifts of tact, suavity and discretion.

He was a materialist and an agnostic—so he informed Ursula; but she, who was quick to recognize little boys at their games, knew him at once for a romantic who could only make existence bearable by such pretences as: “*I think* if you'll give me time I

can put that through for you, Mrs. Garrison," when she asked for a pound of castor sugar, "but you'll understand, I know, that I've good reason for asking you to keep the matter quiet. There are some people here"—with a significant nod at the door—"who'd do neither of us any good if it came round to them. And I needn't tell *you* that in a little place like this things *do* get round in an astonishing way. I mention no names, mind you"—bending still further forward until his beard almost touched Ursula's chin—"but I heard only yesterday that you were thinking of entering into negotiations for a house down here. Now I wouldn't go so far as to say I know of one that might suit you—it's best not to commit oneself in a place like this"—a shrug of the shoulders and a short embittered laugh every time he mentioned "the folks down here" or "a place like this"—"but there'd be no harm in my asking you if you had happened to notice—and a ball of string, Mrs. Garrison? Thank you very much, I'll send it along with the other parcels."

The sudden swerve into ordinary professional tones was for the hoodwinking of a small child who came in for some washing soda. "Now then, Lizzie, what is it? Oh, all right. Run along home, now, your mother'll be wanting this in a hurry."

The bell clanged behind Lizzie . . . and the low diplomatic tones were resumed: "Those children, they gossip worse than their parents, sometimes, and *that's* saying a good deal, in a place like this. Lizzie's

dumb, poor little soul, but still, it's best to be on the safe side, and her grandmother on her father's side, Mrs. Arthur Endellion, that would be—is related to Mr. Wenn that I was just going to tell you about. A sister, in fact."

"But I thought Lizzie was the old postman's granddaughter."

Mr. Wright smiled enigmatically. "Ah, poor old Danny Mawgan—he made the mistake of his life there. Ten pounds was what the Endellions offered him to adopt the baby for good and all; it seemed a great lot to him at the time, he's not too bright, you may have noticed. But now, of course, the money's gone, and the child isn't, so to speak."

Mr. Wright was very pleased with the delicate way he had manoeuvred the story into Ursula's consciousness, without having done anything so commonplace as actually talking village scandal. "About that house, now——"

The door-bell tinkled again, and Doug strode in, wearing very old, very baggy, shaggy tweeds, full of loose ends and string and knots, and very woolly stockings. Ursula introduced Mr. Wright: "He says perhaps he can put us into communication with somebody who knows some one who has heard"—sinking her voice to a careful whisper, for Mr. Wright's manner was infectious—"about a house, Doug."

"Good egg!" cried Doug exuberantly. "Where is this house? Let's go and have a look at it."

Mr. Wright coughed, and on the pretext of re-arranging some tins, came round the counter and closed the door which Doug had left wide open.

"You won't think me interfering, Mr. Barrison, if I ask you first for just how long you've taken Parc Gooth? Don't tell me unless it's convenient. I'm one that can mind his own business, thank God. And you'll find out they're not many of them in this place who can."

"No, I suppose not. Did you choose to settle down her on spec, or because you'd heard about it?"

"*If* I'd heard about it, Mr. Barrison, I would not have chosen to settle down here!" His expressive beard recorded satisfaction at having scored a neat point in cynical repartee.

"Oh come—I'd call it quite a good spot for a man to end his days!" .

"He'd certainly end them quicker here than anywhere else, Mr. Barrison." And the beard found it hard to control its jubilance. "How long did you say they'd bound you to at Parc Gooth?"

"Only three months, and furnished, of course. I thought we'd be sure to have landed something permanent by then."

"Ah. . . . You want to stay here permanently?"

"Rather. I mean to farm."

"Ah. . . ." Mr. Wright concealed knowledge of the conflicting rumours, but all alike sinister, which were afloat in St. Miniott, to account for the Barrisons' arrival among them:

That he (or she) was a dipsomaniac.

That he (or she) was a criminal, either escaped to St. Miniot, or paid to keep out of the way by the family he (or she, or both) had disgraced.

That he (or she) was a spy in the pay of some foreign power.

That he (or she) was an incurable victim to drugs.

The idea that they had removed far from the world's hum merely because they could not (or would not) be conventionally married, was only entertained when bracketed with one of the other conjectures. Otherwise it was too much of a commonplace at St. Miniot to find favour. Mere bankruptcy was also too mild for a thrill. Besides, "foreigners" who came to St. Miniot were usually not bankrupt—beforehand.

"Ah. . . . Then you'll be wanting a house with plenty of land?"

"Not for a year or two. I'm out for practical experience first. . . . I'll go as a labourer to any prosperous farmer in the neighbourhood who'll teach me the job in return. I've all my life in front of me, Sampson, and unless you shove all your guts into an enterprise, you might as well leave it alone. Don't you agree?"

Mr. Wright might have agreed more heartily if he had not just been addressed as Sampson. It proved that Doug had been patronizing the other stores.

"The house I'm thinking of," he began—"but

I'd rather you just gave me your authority for making inquiries about it, and leave it at that for the moment. Between ourselves, Mr. Barrison, it's the property of Isaac Wenn, who keeps the Temperance Hotel up to Polpinnock. That's a local expression, of course—'up to' anywhere. I've been here so long now that I'm sorry to say I'm falling into their habits. Have you heard Wenn spoken of? No? Ah—they're afraid to, for the most part. Wenn's hard—he'd skin a louse for its hide and tallow." He waggled a gratified beard in acknowledgement of Ursula's chuckle. "He was landlord of the King's Arms, near Newquay, when he was younger. Made a pile out of liquor, Wenn did. And now he's making a pile out of temperance."

Ursula's chuckle broke into a laugh: "I think I shall like Mr. Wenn. He sounds broad-minded."

"I'll crash over and see him about the house at once," Doug said. "Only a mile or two to Polpinnock, isn't it?"

Mr. Wright advised him to wait: "And I'll make a few careful inquiries first and then let you know. . . . Let me see—perhaps if you were to call in here Thursday about eleven. . . . And if I've customers in the shop, if you wouldn't mind making out you wanted some trifle——"

"Right-o! I'll buy a ball of string."

"Well—no"—Mr. Wright considered the proposition carefully—"because Lizzie Mawgan heard me selling Mrs. Barrison a ball of string a few minutes

ago; and it might get about and look funny, if it happened again within a week. They’re dreadful scandalmongers down here—poor ignorant souls, they’ve nothing better to do, most of them. But I shouldn’t care for Wenn to get suspicious. Just in confidence, Mr. Barrison, don’t trust him too far. He’s a sharp business man and needs watching. But it might do me harm for him to hear it repeated that I’d make mischief——”

Three ladies in black, gentry, not villagers, came in for groceries; and Mr. Wright served them with that manner of respectful independence by which he accentuated his equal contempt for familiarity or obsequiousness.

“If it comes to being done by landlords,” Doug broke out, “I’d back that jolly old pair of ruffians, the Abbotts, against your Mr. Wenn any day!”

“They let me Parc Gooth, you know,” he continued, unabashed by Mr. Wright’s visible anguish at the fourteen indiscretions committed by that one speech. “Rum old couple. They told me *you* weren’t straight, among other things; but as it turned out a sort of obsession with them that nobody was straight, I didn’t bother.”

“Indeed, sir. Thank you, Mrs. Rowe; thank you, Miss Tregunter. I’m sorry I haven’t that size needles, but I’ll try and put it through for you, if you’ll leave it in my hands. Good morning. . . .”

Alone with the Barrisons again, Mr. Wright was in a quandary. He badly wanted to talk about the

Abbotts; in fact, he had inside information about Parc Gooth; but he felt also that Doug ought to be brought to realize he had committed grave errors of policy. So that his reply was stiff and shaded with reproach.

"I'm not surprised Mr. Abbott should not be feeling friendly towards me, sir. I was rather disposed to be reserved and cautious in my dealings with him. He was too fond of calling everybody a rogue, to be altogether an honest man himself. Now Miss Gregson, who built Parc Gooth, she was of good family, there was no mistaking it; she wore her hair short like a man's, and had a deep bullying voice, and her clothes might have been fished out of the bottom of a ditch when the winter floods went down. But for all that, so soft-hearted and believing, that any one could have made a fool of her, and most people did, hereabouts. And then she married a pretty fellow, an Italian circus-rider, they said he was, and that was the end of her as far as St. Minot was concerned. And that was where Mr. and Mrs. Abbott came in. You took the house direct from the Laceys, I suppose?"

"Without seeing them, yes. But when we got there, we found a respectable old granny and grandfather camping in the wash-house, and they smiled at us and said they were the Abbotts and we weren't to trust the Laceys because the house was really not theirs for letting. We tried to work it out, and they treated us to an excellent supper they had ordered in

at our expense, and ate some oatmeal biscuits and onions themselves, and we discussed Bocaccio. . . . Mrs. Abbott had a sort of thin brittle titter as though you were treading on dry leaves, which rather upset me, and the old chap reminded me of a discontented Mr. Pickwick. . . .”

“Quite so, sir,” put in Mr. Wright, to show that he had read Dickens.

Ursula lifted the description away from Doug: “And at eleven o’clock or thereabouts, they began packing up all their things in filthy old bags and bottles and biscuit-tins and bits of carpet and torn sacking; and hung them in bundles round a crazy pony-cart, with the harness all tied up with string and rags; and then they told us that the pony had once been Mr. Abbott’s polo mount and had won many cups; and would we drop them a card c/o the Gullick post-office at any time we’re away for a week-end, as they enjoyed coming over to camp at Parc Gooth; and could we lend them fivepence for lump sugar which was healthier than any meat, and a perusal of ‘Timon of Athens’ would enlighten us as to the characters of all the hypocrites and parasites who swarmed in St. Miniott. . . . And so saying, Mrs. Abbott lit a red lantern, and hopped into the cart and they drove away, rattling and bumping up the dark lane. I couldn’t help wondering——” but she remembered that Mr. Wright had his limitations, and kept to herself the appeal which the lawless homeless Abbotts had made to her imagination.

Young, roystering, rollicking adventurers, here today, on the road tomorrow, ready for flight at any moment, picking up a precarious living by their wits—*Young* rogues and adventurers were not uncommon nor to be pitied. But Mr. and Mrs. Abbott were well over sixty—and, it might seem, too old to live defiantly. They ought to have settled down long ago to days of pious security, fussed over by kindly grandchildren, and quite certain of the same chair in the same place until they peacefully died.

“Oh well, we haven’t come to the end of the Abbotts yet—but I’d watch him if I were you, sir. There’s a lot more I could tell you. . . . It’s a house of ill luck, Parc Gooth is, for all that it’s not yet built four years. I’ll let you know about what I said before, when I said I would. Thank you, Mr. Barrison. Good-day, madam.”

[II]

ONCE outside Mr. Wright’s stuffy little shop, Ursula said doubtfully: “These rustics, they’re awfully quaint, aren’t they, Doug?”

“Thumping good fellows, all of them,” replied her husband, in vigorous remonstrance of her uneasiness.

“I wonder why they all tell us to watch each other. . . . D’you remember what the Abbotts told us about Wright?”

“I think old Abbott means well—he’s one of us,

of course, and sees our point of view . . . what was it he said about Wenn of the Temperance Hotel?"

"Said he was the most dangerous thief in the neighbourhood. . . . M'yes. That's our future landlord, isn't it?"

Their eyes met—and they laughed.

"Arcadia . . ." said Ursula.

"More or less."

"I wonder if the Laceys *are* paying over our rent to Miss Gregson and her circus-rider, or to the Abbotts."

"Or keeping it themselves," suggested Doug, vaulting a gate. "How unmarried you look, Teddy," as she followed him over, with that sedate air which she wore like a fichu and dorothy-bag. "It's hardly respectable."

"Young, do you mean?"

"Yes . . . not quite—" His meaning slipped elusively away, and he stifled her in a warm tweed hug. "It's splendid having you all day long like this, isn't it? though that'll have to stop directly I start work. I fixed it up with Mrs. Thomas this morning, before I met you. She was a bit astonished that I wanted to work like an ordinary farm-hand, and consulted her two sons about it . . . snobbish young cubs who were officers in the war. They said I could clean out the shippions on Saturday mornings, if I tipped the man who usually does it."

"It sounds a good arrangement—for somebody."

Doug, did *they* say anything about Parc Gooth and who we weren't to trust?"

"The Laceys," promptly. "They're thieves and swindlers and never paid up their rent at all, so they've no right to ours; the Gregsons have, but they've sub-let to the Abbotts, who drove away the Todys who are coming back tomorrow; and Mrs. Thomas says we can trust *them*. Mrs. Tody's her sister."

Ursula collapsed on to a flat stone, overwhelmed by the sweet wholesome primitive state of affairs into which their flight from complex London had landed them.

Doug had followed their post-Doreen conversation in the boarding house, by an impetuous day on which he handed in his immediate resignation to the Knapsack Club, bought a *Devon and Morcar Post*, and broke it to his mother—or rather smashed it over her—that he and Ursula had decided to emigrate to the remote West Country, and become farmers.

The Knapsack Club subscribed to present him with a silver-topped walking-stick; his mother had a heart-attack; and in the *Post* they found Parc Gooth advertised as "To Let furnished."

Doug had some money of his own, not very much, but sufficient to keep them both for a couple of years or so, until he had learned farming.

So the Barrisons corresponded with the Laceys, who apparently lived in Nottingham; and liking the sound of Parc Gooth, they took it for three months.

They sent the Laceys half their rent in advance, who in reply hoped they would find everything comfortable, including a handy man and his equally handy wife, Mr. and Mrs. Tody, attached to the house since its infancy, who would be upon the premises when Mr. and Mrs. Garrison arrived, to be used as convenient.

“Directly we’ve got our sea-legs, we can sling ’em out,” said Doug. “Their name’s a bit ominous.”

“Oh, people are never like their names, really. . . .”

But anyhow, on arrival, they found Mr. and Mrs. Tody had retired in a temper to relations in Gullick; and instead, they were warmly welcomed by the mysterious Abbotts, who, with their onions and biscuit-boxes, were camping in the kitchen; and, with a lazy proprietorial air, re-painting the front door. The Abbotts told them that they had rented Parc Gooth for seven years from their dear friend Miss Gregson who built it, but had to leave it because St. Miniot passionately rejected her nice new Italian-Circus husband who jumped through hoops. The Abbotts sub-let it for three years, complete with Todys, to the Laceys. Tody, apparently, had been St. Miniot’s cobbler, but ever since eccentric and lovable Miss Gregson had built Parc Gooth, he had renounced cobbling, and devoted himself to the house.

After expensively re-decorating the house, and doing their utmost to efface some of the blatant

rigid hideousness of its exterior, Mr. Lacey suddenly took an urgent dislike to the house, and returned with his wife to Nottingham. The rumour crept about, as it always did on these occasions, that they were ruined. The Abbotts told Doug that they had never received any rent from the Laceys, and therefore the Laceys had no right to the rent which Doug had paid.

“Abbott’s your landlord, not Lacey,” was the situation’s paraphrase on the immortal Codlin. To which the Laceys retorted, by letter, that they had paid their rent, due to the Abbotts, direct to Miss Gregson, because they did not trust the Abbotts and nor did Tody! . . .

“Then did our rent, via the Laceys, also go to Miss Gregson?” wondered Ursula, as she and Doug, sitting side by side on a piece of granite stone on the moors, tried to grasp the intricacies of Parc Gooth. “And do the Abbotts also pay Miss Gregson for their seven years? And supposing Miss Gregson doesn’t exist at all?”

“I dunno,” said Doug, gloomily, stretched at her feet. “We’ll see if Tody says we may trust old Wright. Parc Gooth is rather like a musical comedy, isn’t it? composed by—libretto by—lyrics by—additional lyrics—and entirely new costumes and scenery in Act II. I say, we’re half-way to Polpinnock Head. Let’s go on, and have a drink with Wenn and see about his cottage to let. I’m fed up with Parc Gooth.”

"Wright said we were to leave it to him to open discreet negotiations without mentioning names."

"Well, I can negotiate as discreetly as a small village shopkeeper, I suppose . . ." and Doug marched up to a man standing in the doorway of the one hotel at Polpinnock, with a bluff: "Good day. Are you Wenn? Wright of St. Miniott tells me you've got a house to let. What about letting it to us, eh? . . . My name's Barrison."

Ursula, in the background, smiled—and adored him.

Mr. Wenn said eagerly that he had indeed a house to let, a beautiful house, a gentleman's house—but—hastily amending his eagerness—he did not at all want to let it. In fact, he intended to live in it himself. . . .

"A villain so transparent as to be lovable," reflected Ursula, summing him up. It was wonderful that with his naïve simplicity he should have attained such a sway of terror in St. Miniott and Polpinnock.

Isaac Wenn was tall and ruddy, with a short black moustache. He wore a lilac cotton tie; and he spoke of himself pathetically as an old man, or nonchalantly as still a young one, adapted to opportunities of gain. Frequently, too, he spoke of money, and always as "good money"; the adjective was never omitted: "I paid good money to get my boys educated," he would say, with a tinge of regret in his voice.

Now, hearing that Doug was in search of a house, he became blatantly the spider who has sighted a fat fly:

"Who was it, did you say, sir, told you I'd a house to let?"

"I don't know," stammered Doug, suddenly remembering that he was under pledge to be wary and not mention the name of Wright, and forgetting that he had already done so.

"Ah. You'm stayin' up to Parc Gooth."

"Yes," and the Barrisons waited apprehensively for warnings against the Abbotts, the Todys or the Laceys, according to the direction of Mr. Wenn's prejudice.

"I never got on with Miss Gregson," said Wenn unexpectedly, taking the cigarette Doug offered him; "Thank you, sir—nor with Wright of St. Miniot neither. They'm not teetotallers, none of 'em—and when a man takes a glass too much, why he takes two or three glasses, d'you see, sir? throwing good money down their throats, 'stead of putting it by. And then they get tu talking. They'm all too fond of drink and talk, up tu St. Miniot. The one gentleman o' the lot's Mr. Abbott. Many's the friendly glass o' lemonade him and me have had together, sittin' here at this table. You can trust he, same as you can trust me, being neither of us drinkers," concluded Wenn of the Temperance Hotel, whose truculent speech

and red face were unfortunate legacies from his former career as landlord of the King's Arms, Newquay.

"Now about this house. What rent was ee prepared to pay, Mr. Barrison?"

"I'm a poor man," Doug began, doing a little rudimentary diplomacy on his own.

Mr. Wenn laughed with forced geniality.

"Oh, come. Oh, that's good. You don't expect me to believe that. Wish I had what you had, Mr. Barrison!"

"I wish you had," replied Doug; "I mean I wish I had what you wished you had if I had it. . . ."

It struck Ursula that they were both more pathetic than comic, with their elaborate show of tactics and bluff. More little boys at their games . . . they might just as well sit down side by side with their feet turned in, and say: "I'm going to do you!" "Yes, an' I'm goin' to do you too!"

Finally, they were taken to look at the house. It stood in a clump with the Vicarage, the doctor's house and the butcher's house. The latter was the most palatial of the three, but Mr. Wenn's house was approached by a carriage-drive which was his special pride: "This is a gentleman's residence," he said; and pointed out some artificial swirls and markings which covered the light shiny wood of

the front door: "That there graining, I did every bit of it myself. It costs good money to have done, graining does."

"It's a *horrible* house," whispered Ursula to Doug, who nodded agreement.

But sycophantically they praised it to the complacent Wenn, who, sure now of his tenants, began to bluster afresh that his intention in getting rid of the former occupants, was to dwell himself, with his wife and family, at Bella Vista.

"Then have you anything else to let, Mr. Wenn?"

"Only a cottage; nearer St. Miniot; about a couple o' miles from here back along by the moor. I'll have the jingle out—no trouble at all, Mrs. Barrison." He was anxious to show them the cottage, to emphasize in tantalizing contrast the superiority of Bella Vista.

While he harnessed the pony to the jingle, Ursula strolled down on to the Polpinnock sands, much valued by families, because they were "so safe," and by sightseers, because they contained the famous Drummer's Cave. Returning to Wenn's Temperance Hotel, which stood on a small outjutting headland west of the cove, she noticed on a similar headland east of the cove, the torn and jagged framework of a ruined house, looking rather like the mouth of a Jew after treatment from King John. A dejected signboard still flapped over a non-existent frontage, and on it Ursula was able to decipher the

words “Polpinnock Arms.” From which she gathered the significant truth, that this dilapidated tumble of masonry had once been the rival establishment to Mr. Wenn’s hotel.

Perhaps, after all, rumour might be correct in saying that Wenn was a hard man. . . .

She was silent on the drive, studying the stolid red of his nape, and wishing one might adopt the simple course of asking a swindler straight out whether he were a swindler or not.

The cottage stood on the empty edge of cliff between rough moor and sea. It was a defiantly plain squat little building of grey stone, seeming to emphasize the fact that what with winter storms and so forth, it had no time for mere prinking prettiness. The gorse and bramble grew almost up to the doors, without any compromise of garden; and there was no carriage drive. Obviously not a “gentleman’s residence.”

Yet Ursula and Doug both knew at once that, in the jargon of house-agents, they were suited.

“We might as well look inside,” said Ursula in disparaging tones. For she was beginning to know Mr. Wenn.

The entrance faced the moors; and so did the two windows of the large living-room kitchen; West was a fair-sized scullery kitchen. Behind the living-room was a much smaller one, with gorse-bushes choking the view. . . . “These’ll have to be rooted up and cleared away,” said Doug.

Mr. Wenn glanced at him sharply: "The sort I let it tu won't object tu a bit o' stiffish digging. It's only fit for labourers. Not for gentlefolk, o' course."

Doug and Ursula said nothing. They went upstairs. A large double bedroom looked onto the moors; leading from it was a roomy box-room over the scullery—"My dressing-room," murmured Doug. Along the short passage . . . a door flung open. . . .

[III]

A SMALL room with irregular corners, a dipping roof, and two stark windows full of the sea. Ursula's heart gave a queer sort of twist when she saw it. It was her own room, of which she had been robbed years and years ago—her own room; only with the outlook metamorphosed from a blank wall, to the tumbling shining enchantment of space and green water beyond, and sunshine which slipped about the bare floor. Once again she was whipped by the old feeling of high secret expectation. . . . In here something significant was to happen to her—to her alone.

In the room . . . her room . . . loving it, she took possession.

[IV]

“——for a spare-room, in case we want to put somebody up for a few nights,” finished Doug.

Wenn had followed them up the stairs: “I’m a blunt man, sir, and when there’s business to be talked, I like to be plain and straightforward about it, and get it over. That’s my way. I don’t mind saying that I like you, and if you was really thinking of settling down at Bella Vista——”

“We mean to settle down here,” said Ursula, breaking it to him.

He could not understand it, and he would not accept it without understanding. Bella Vista was a gentleman’s residence with grained doors, entrance hall and glasshouse, inside sanitation and every convenience. This grey stone cottage had absolutely nothing to recommend it; even accepting the fact that gentry and foreigners were often “queer”—it was mostly only the queer ones who came to live any longer space of time than just the summer holidays at St. Miniot or Polpinnock—even they, surely, must recognize the overwhelming superiority of Bella Vista? Wenn argued and argued, with bulging eyes, and his tie an angrier lilac against his deep-coloured face. He disparaged his cottage with a zest that would have astonished the former tenants. He pointed out the fact that it was lonely, and liable to sudden night attacks: that the soil was too poor

even to grow potatoes; that all water had to be pumped up from the well outside; that the beamed ceilings were low, the windows draughty, and the roof unreliable; no carts or cars could drive up to it, moreover, as the only access was by a looping foot-path across the moor. Wenn himself was a poor man, but he could never bring himself to live in such a rough sort of a hole nor yet to bring his missus to live in it. Mr. Barrison—with stolid contempt he eliminated Ursula from negotiation—Mr. Barrison had better reconsider his joke, for o' course it was only a joke, and take Bella Vista on a three years' lease. “And I'll tell ee what I'll do, sir; I'll rent it to you for fifty-five pounds a year, and that's ten pounds good money less than I meant to ask for” . . . he had meant to ask forty-eight pounds, but the discussion had made him thirsty, and thirst is as little pleasure to a temperance landlord who has once been an honest drinker, as sunset to a blind man who has once had his sight.

Finally, as the Barrisons could not be persuaded to return to Bella Vista and be charmed by a more detailed inspection of the graining; and as Wenn simply could not believe it possible that any one actually in his senses could *prefer* the cottage—“It isn't a question of rent at all,” Doug remarked rashly—they agreed to let the matter stand over for reflection and further counsels. And Wenn charged them heavily both for the hire of his jingle, and for driving it in person.

[V]

MANY times during the week which followed, Ursula caught sight of Wenn and Wright, the lilac tie and the sagacious beard, standing together in confidential attitudes about the lanes, or in the doorway of Wright's garden, or in the evening shadow of a fuchsia-bush. And afterwards Wright would remark, àpropos of nothing, that Wenn was just having a look at his early cabbages which were coming up earlier than any on record. . . . “And”—in an undertone over the counter—“I'm attending to that little affair of you-know-what, sir. I hope to be able to put it through for you. But you'll understand I'm in a delicate position and”—Mr. Wright came round the counter and closed the shop-door—“I wouldn't altogether trust Wenn. . . . He needs watching.” . . .

At the end of the week, after one more attempt to cajole Doug into taking over Bella Vista, Wenn gave it up as hopeless, and realizing that a tenant of the grey stone cottage was better than no tenant at all, suddenly abandoned his former policy, and began to boast of its many excellencies which he had the week before depreciated, such as the pure spring of well-water (how much wholesomer than water from pipes); the soothing distance from any road, so that no rumble should profane the quiet (“It cost me good money to get that quiet laid on” was the unspoken parenthesis in Wenn language). Likewise he drew

unblushing attention to the stability of the roof, the tightness of the windows in their frames, and the richness of the surrounding soil!

The Barrisons took the cottage. They called it Grey Stone, because they did not want to call it Sea View, and grey stone and a sea view were the only obvious facts about it. Wenn, who enjoyed such succulent adjuncts to business as leases, lawyers, clauses, seals and so forth, as other men enjoyed women and wine, promised jubilantly to give instructions to his lawyer, and drive them himself into Gullick, the nearest town, when the formalities were ready. Meanwhile, they still had several weeks at Parc Gooth—and the Todys had returned.

Mrs. Tody was a respectful shadow in poor health who cooked well. Her husband, whose official position at Parc Gooth seemed to be a sort of Morcarian Beefeater, greeted his new master and mistress with a long glib speech of welcome, addressed not to them directly but to some impersonal lady and gentleman standing beside them. He also referred constantly, and in terms of deep admiration, to one Tody. . . . The Barrisons were puzzled as to the identity of this Tody, who might quite well have been Toby himself, but who seemed also to have the distinct identity of a third person.

“. . . Tody is very pleased to see the lady and gentleman. If the gentleman acts fair by Tody, then 'e won't have nothing to complain of. But when they swindling Abbotts as don't belong to set

foot in Parc Gooth, walk in with their tales of Mr. and Mrs. Lacey who are a generous lady and gentleman which they Abbotts are neither one nor t’other, why, then Tody remembers he was engaged by Miss Gregson and no one else, and ‘e packs up and ‘e goes. . . .”

To Doug and Ursula the whole Parc Gooth narrative was by now a confusion, in which irrelevant names and grotesque sinister persons bobbed up and vanished as in an unreasonable dream. Ursula did not attempt any more to untwist the rights and wrongs of it all; but, dwelling in the house with her was an uneasiness that swelled almost to fear . . . after all, they were “foreigners” among the natives of Arcadia; and the matter-of-fact natives told strange legends about other “foreigners” who had settled down in the locality, perhaps seeking for peace or healing or burial . . . and they had all been ruined; sold up; shot themselves; the least among them were labelled “freaks.” Such as, for instance, Mrs. Fawcett, whose little house in the village was stifled with ivy, and a-swarm with cats: a frowsy temple dedicated to cat-worship; some of them sick, and some slow with kittens. And young Fawcett, her son, grey for his forty years and “queerish,” still remembered that he had years ago been a journalist, and still wrote “topical” articles for the papers; but news was stale before it reached St. Minot; and more stale before the article was laboriously conceived, written and sent off. Once on sight of Ursula and Doug, he had

leapt a stile and rushed towards them across three fields. "Excuse me, but *have* you read 'Pendennis'?" he panted "Oh, you have? I'm so glad. Good day" . . . and rushed off again.

Doug roared with laughter, but Ursula shuddered, and for an instant hated the bright glinting sea and hard-coloured gorse. Was this the result of living in Arcadia?

[VI]

M R. WENN, shortly afterwards, drove them into Gullick to sign the lease at his lawyer's; and beguiled the eleven miles of monotonous road by anecdotes of his many successes in "doing" people, with the same ingenuous charm as an executioner might display towards his victims in a tumbril, by entertaining them with sunny accounts of his prowess with the axe.

"This lawyer chap of yours," asked Doug with a not unnatural misgiving, "is he a decent sort?"

"Oh, Roberts? He'm a gentleman's lawyer, Mr. Barrison," and Wenn produced his famous straight-between-the-eyes look. "They call un Gentleman Roberts hereabout, and that's the truth. Mitch"—to a grey, bent henchman whom he had brought along in the jingle to lead the horse up the hills, and—obviously—to corroborate his statements—"what do they call Mr. Roberts hereabouts?"

"Gentleman Roberts," responded Joshua Mitch, promptly.

Gentleman Roberts had drawn up a lease most marvellously in favour of Isaac Wenn and to the disadvantage of Douglas Barrison. He lost his temper every time Doug questioned a clause, and threw his inkpot down and stamped about the floor. Finally, Doug and Wenn both pressed their thumbs solemnly upon a seal and repeated an oath, and the "foreigner" was charged five guineas.

"Five guineas was rather a lot to plank down for a simple job like that, surely?" remarked Ursula, as, once more in the jingle, they jolted home along eleven miles of dark and chilly road.

"Usual price, Mrs. Barrison." Wenn was in a rubicund state of good humour, in contrast to the Barrisons' slight moodiness. "You wouldn't find Gentleman Roberts'd do a fly. Five guineas is what I pay for a lease whenever I can afford to buy a bit o' property. Mitch, what price did ee pay for lease when you took Trewoofa?"

"Five guineas," droned the well-trained Joshua Mitch, from where he trudged at the horse's head.

Ursula longed to ask whether he also took a small percentage of the day's easy gains; or if Wenn and Gentleman Roberts, with many chuckles, divided the five guineas equally, and Mitch backed them up merely because he was a humble minion in their power? But she refrained, because the road was

long and chilly and very dark . . . and on either side was a ditch.

"You've got a rare bargain in renting that there cottage o' mine," Wenn continued, turning up the collar of his overcoat. "Why, the tenant afore you—one o' the Endellions, moved away to St. Pol now, he made twelve pounds, two summers back, out o' growin' potatoes alone. Mitch, what did William Endellion make out o' potatoes up tu my cottage, two summers back?"

"Twelve pounds," said Joshua Mitch.

The next morning, Wenn appeared suddenly in the doorway of Parc Gooth, his hands full of early cauliflowers which he had brought the Barrisons as a spontaneous gift from his own garden at Polpinnock. Most gifts are made in a spirit of either generosity or remorse; Wenn was not by nature generous.

"*Timeo Danaos. . . .*" murmured Ursula.

[VII]

THE doors of Wright's General Stores were closed and heavily barred, when the Barrisons went round to him with an account of the sinister cauliflowers; after repeated noisy rappings from Doug's specially knotted and gnarled black-thorn, a reconnoitering beard was thrust through a flap—"One minute, sir, if you don't mind," bars were drawn back, keys turned, and the lower part of

the door creaked cautiously open, admitting Ursula and Doug, and was hastily closed again behind them. "It's my travellers' day," explained Mr. Wright, breathing very hard. "You won't mind waiting a few minutes?"

Two sad-faced men with bags of samples were sitting by the counter, and Mr. Wright proceeded to impress his spectators by doing tremendous deals in St. Miniot rock, a pink sugar-stick with the name of the village running through in green. At last the travellers were let out conspiratorially by a back door; and Mr. Wright, with the air of a Minister who, by an effort, dismisses an international crisis from his mind and switches it instead on to a minor question of drains, asked Mr. and Mrs. Garrison how he could help them?

"Ah!" he wagged his beard suspiciously at the incident of the doings at Gullick, and said that certain people, mentioning no names, needed watching all the time.

"You'll be going to St. Pol, no doubt, for your furniture? You'll find some dishonest dealers up there, that charge high prices for rotten stuff. Now I could give you an introduction——"

Doug and Ursula stood outside Mr. Wright's shop, gazing at the window display: dusty bottles of Condy's fluid; a heap of faded red, white and blue Coronation whistles, and some tin kettles.

"I don't think that his ideas of decoration and ours

are quite the same," said Doug. "We'll go and rummage round in St. Pol on our own, Teddy."

Ursula, gazing silently at the window, was again clutched by apprehension. . . . Wright had not always lived at St. Miniot; he had travelled, dwelt in big cities, seen the shop-windows of great stores; why, then, did he not devote one morning's energy and initiative into transforming his dreary and out-of-date frontage into bright new order, inviting customers. Was it that it did not matter—here?

"Is it true, Mrs. Barrison, that you've taken Wenn's cottage on the moor? They told me so, at Endellion's cart"—Endellion, one of a large family, was the butcher who lived in the big mansion opposite the Vicarage. His cart, hung with joints, a welter of opaque pink and thick white, stood in his carriage-drive twice a week; and he, on the steps of his own front door, condescended affably to the humble stream of visitors and natives who trooped up to him with their dishes and baskets. "Endellion is so very disobliging," Mrs. Fawcett went on, half crying. "He won't let me have calves' liver for my darlings, simply because Miss Tregunter at Penallen Lodge is so fond of liver, she takes all he's got. You'll want a cat directly you move in, won't you, Mrs. Barrison? I can let you have the dearest little ginger tom—it'll break my heart to let him go." She was half crying still from her encounter with Endellion over the liver. "Dear me, I suppose you'll be with us for good, now. Fancy that. But I'm sorry Wenn is your

landlord—I wouldn't be in his clutches for anything. Don't trust him, Mrs. Barrison. . . . Poor Frankie Davis, who lived at Jermyn Street—wasn't that an odd name for him to call his house down here?—he shot himself after two years."

"Was Wenn his landlord, then?"

"Oh no, but still"—vaguely—"one must be careful. Poor Frankie—he had one of my sweetest cats, and it came back to me after the tragedy, and I save it an extra saucer of chicken broth whenever I can, because it has seemed so queer ever since . . . They know, you see, better than we do, often. Frankie Davis had a wonderful marble staircase," she rumbled on, "and he had a gang of workmen all the way down from London to move it four times and set it up in different parts of the house, to see where it looked best. And then he went bankrupt and was sold up. . . . So many of them do down here. Well, it was all very exciting and we mustn't think about it. Oh, good day, Mr. Wenn"—Mrs. Fawcett scurried into her cat-temple, which was next door to Wright's shop.

"I been digging you a cess-pit, Mr. Barrison," said Wenn.

Doug thanked him.

"An' your pump wasn't workin'," he continued, with a touch of grievance in his voice—for obviously since the lease was signed, Doug was now responsible for the pump; "so I had to send my son—Henry, the middle one—down your well to find out

where the stoppage was. More'n fifty foot deep it was . . . lucky thing Henry went down, too, because if I'd hired a man to put on a dangerous job like that, I'd have had to pay good money to insure his life. But I won't charge ee more'n I can help, Mr. Barrison. I only want to make you comfortable in the place."

Doug thanked him again, and Ursula amused herself by raising serious childish eyes to meet Wenn's squarely, with the question: "They say you're a hard man, Mr. Wenn? Is it true?" It was a trick which she had discovered, to disconcert him completely.

"I'd like to know them as say it, Mrs. Barrison."

"I believe in you absolutely, Mr. Wenn. I *know* you wouldn't cheat us" . . . she wondered whether she dare slip a trustful little hand into his palm.

[VIII]

IT became apparent during the last three or four weeks of the Barrisons' tenancy at Parc Gooth, that all its various landlords and sub-landlords were pulling cross-strings at the question of its future. The Abbotts jingled up to the back door, late one evening, and suavely begged for a night's shelter, as they had business to transact at dawn. Ursula, from her bedroom window, watched them untying from the burdened harness their usual paraphernalia of sacks and parcels, bottles and cans and blankets;

Mr. Abbott was a large goblin outline in the sinister yellow flicker of their lantern; she heard and hated Mrs. Abbott's thin rustling laugh, in reply to some pleasantry of Doug, genial and commonplace in a rough, brown dressing-gown—the type of dressing-gown that proclaimed its owner had no use for effeminate men.

Very early in the morning, the Abbotts were reported to have been in profound conference with Wenn, of all people in Arcadia! and seemingly satisfied, rattled away again before the hostile Todys appeared from their cottage. And after that, Wenn frequently stood immovable at the gate of Parc Gooth, staring at it, as one who had a right to stare. . . .

And a whisper went round that Wright, of the General Stores, was in communication with Miss Gregson, who was in Scotland—at least, so the postman's sister said—("An' she du belong to know!")

Then whom was he betraying? his old crony, Wenn? Whose interests did he watchfully guard? Tody confided in Ursula his disgusted suspicions: "If aught's been done that shouldn't be, Tody'll know what to do. The lady and gentleman, who was here before the lady and gentleman, they put their trust in Tody and nobody else, and if they have to be written to about goings-on over this house, it's Tody ought to do it, as it wouldn't be pleasant for the lady to be mixed up in it."

"He's going to write to Lacey," Doug decided, when Ursula brought him this speech for elucidation.

Ursula wriggled, as though she felt the meshes of a net—"I believe this beastly house has a curse on it."

"Can't have," replied Doug cheerfully. "It isn't old. Why, it's almost new."

"That's just it. An almost new house with a curse on it is uncannier than an old one, where you expect it more. And we're in the thick of it. And whispers crawling about like spiders. I wish—I wish we were already at Grey Stone."

"Jove, so do I! I want to knock up a lot of shelves in my cabin."

Wild rumours were flying now from St. Miniot to Polpinnock Cove, and from Churchtown and Polpinnock back to St. Miniot, regarding the destiny of Parc Gooth. The Abbotts came no more at night, but they were frequently "seen about" in their restless jingle; Wenn was reported to have given an unsolicited penny to an urchin who had fallen down and was crying; pregnant sign of good temper! Tody bought a bottle of ink and a pen at Sampson's shop—noticeably not at Wright's. And Wright received the Barrisons with a grave face, and formally attended to them from behind the counter. Only once did he relax sufficiently to say: "If any one should call to see over the house, sir, I'd make very careful inquiries as to who sent him, before you give your consent. It's your responsibility, you see. . . ."

In Arcadia, things quickly swell out of their right proportions. . . . Ursula thought of the silly house and the silly affairs, and the silly gossip surrounding

it, as though it were really vital. She was interested in any fresh development in the accumulating scandal—morbidly worried over the hints to be careful, dropped from first one direction and then another. Her sense of amusement was being nagged away by the humourless pre-occupations of Arcadia, and fear obsessed and suffocated her. . . . Suddenly, she felt indeed a foreigner, and as such, apologetic and timorous. After all, they were going to settle down in this place, perhaps never to leave it, so it mattered that the natives should not hate them; it was important to twist and wriggle and force your viewpoint to the same alien angle as theirs—"you have made your bed and you must lie on it!" For the moment Ursula was helplessly victim to this fallacy. Then a telegram was delivered at Parc Gooth by a sloe-eyed, grinning youngster so agog to spread its contents that he practically threw it over the garden wall. It was signed "Gregson," and said curtly: "Allow no one to inspect house. Arriving shortly." Half an hour later, Major Allingham-Jones, a cross little inquisitive yellowish man and his large pink wife, stood clamouring at the front door, with the Laceys' written authority to be shown over Parc Gooth. Doug was happily employed up at the cottage, wrenching at the roots of gorse and bramble which obscured the window of his cabin, so Ursula had to refuse the couple admittance, on her own initiative; she thought on the whole she would rather offend the

Laceys, who lived at Nottingham, than the near-pressing tradesmen of St. Miniot and Polpinnock, in whose power they lay for shelter, sustenance, warmth and society. Oh, the hateful propitiating dependence of life lived moderately close to nature! Oh, the humility of not being able to change your butcher or threaten the only person in the district who hires out jingles and cars.

Tody was sulky with Ursula all the rest of the day, having had private information by post from Mr. and Mrs. Lacey that the Allingham-Joneses were to be graciously received at Parc Gooth, as they would pay a good rent for such a house, and good wages to Tody. He hinted menacingly that if Wright imagined by writing lies to Miss Gregson he could do Tody out of a job, then Tody, who was prepared to act fairly by everybody, would have to tell the lady and gentleman an item of news that hitherto he had kept to Tody for fear of upsetting the lady who had so far treated him fairly. . . .

[IX]

URSULA went forth from beleaguerment to a sale in the neighbourhood of Polpinnock. With her last remnants of idealism, she hoped to be able to bid successfully for "good" pieces of old furniture for Grey Stone, against an innocent throng unaware of their value. The ruined family were as usual impulsive

“foreigners” who had settled down four years earlier, hoping to prosper body and soul, at the expense of the unsophisticated natives . . . who mysteriously, never came to grief in the same inevitable fashion, but were always able to crowd to the sales and make profitable purchases for their own homes speculating the while with stolid excitement on the exact disasters which has led to the hammer’s triple fall.

Wenn was there, bearing himself like a man who can see through the auctioneer’s humbug, and calculate the worth of things for himself. If his vulture eye happened to see some old flowerpots, beansticks or potato-peelings going cheap, he might bargain for them, but he warned Ursula against throwing away good money: “You’ve got dealers running up prices against ee all the time. There’s several of ‘em here talking about roots and barley to make believe they’re farmers from up-along. Look, Mrs. Garrison, there’s something I want to tell ee if you’ll step with me where tes quiet!”

They pushed their way through the groups in the trampled yard and garden with its forlorn furniture piled up in lots; and in a corner of the field where the auctioneer’s monotonously jocund voice only reached them faintly, Wenn announced that he had bought the remainder of Abbott’s seven-year lease of Parc Gooth, and had already found a good tenant, an American who was staying at his hotel, and wished to be shown over the house very shortly.

"But——" Ursula stopped short, in desperate perplexity. Wenn was their landlord at Grey Stone . . . supposing she offended him, and the well went wrong, and he refused to send down Henry, his middle son (because it was too dangerous a job on which to risk a hired man). Supposing . . . Yes, but that wire from Miss Gregson . . . and the Allingham-Joneses, backed up by Tody, calling nearly every day. . . .

Without replying to Wenn, she went quickly back to where the sale was active and already slightly dissipated and hysterical. Queer, unlikely bits of rubbish, such as a stuffed hawk, a pair of ornate vases, battered tin pails, some old boots and a roll of linoleum fetched abnormal prices, far larger than their new equivalents in a shop. It seemed every now and again, as though the bodiless voices from the crowd—voices that were alternately defiant or timid—simply could not stop themselves from bidding higher and higher. . . . The scene was watched by the quondam owners of "The Mount": Mr. Gregory Loftus, his son and three middle-aged daughters, with cynical smiles. They were ruined, and it was—according to popular opinion—indescribably indecent of them to be present at all, witnesses of their own disgrace; but Ursula envied them . . . and was frightened because she envied them: "They've lost their property and their money—yes, but they've got away! they've escaped! . . ."

"One poun'-fifteen-an-six I am bid.—One-poun'-sixteen shall I make it?"

She brought nothing home from the sale except weariness and an inferior copper kettle with an unexpected hole in the bottom.

Waiting for her at Parc Gooth was a letter from Miss Roberts—"Gums" of her schoolroom days, and now installed with Grace and Stanley Watson at "Merlin's Isle" (late "The Kopje")—to be governess to Honor Rose, aged eleven, and to Honor Rose's three little sisters, Lucy Ann, Freda and Belphoebe, nine, seven and five years old respectively, their ages diminishing with as compact a fit as a nest of tables, one within the other. The letter was full of chirpy gossip, such as: "Lottie has been staying with us for a fortnight; she is such a good auntie to the little girls and so helpful; I think Lottie has a beautiful character." And: "Your mother and Aunt Lavvy went up to London last Saturday to have tea with Hal in his new chambers. I think that quite soon we shall have some interesting news to tell you about that young man!"

She looked with bright bird-like eyes upon Ursula's affairs, determined to find them very good: "How lovely for you, Ursula dear, to be living a peaceful rural life with your husband. I am sure it is healthy; after all, what could be more invigorating than Nature. We are all expecting cream and butter and eggs from you as soon as they begin to lay well."

The society of the quaint rustics must make you long to write a book about them. Don't be proud, dear, but go about among them and share their joys and sorrows as though you were one of themselves; teach them—tactfully, of course—all you can about hygiene and the first care of babies; and I am sure that in time you will learn to love these simple folk. . . .”

Ursula's smile held more irony than genuine merriment.

There would always be trustful, credulous people like Doug and herself, like Miss Roberts, like the late Frankie Davis and the Allingham-Joneses and Mr. Gregory Loftus and his daughters, who left the gritty evil of towns behind them, intending to nestle closer to Nature, in the uncomplicated country amongst those quaint rustics. . . . Those same rustics who, a few years later, watching the broken, penniless procession wending their way back again to the towns, might murmur perhaps, with kindly, if contemptuous affection: “One learns to love these simple folk. . . .”

[X]

JUNE 24th ended their tenancy at Parc Gooth; and the problem of its disposal was still unsettled the day before the Barrisons moved their belongings into Grey Stone, preparatory to moving in themselves the following morning. They had spent a

day at St. Pol buying furniture; and the motor-van duly arrived on the morning of the 23rd, and halted a quarter of a mile away from the cottage, which was as near as the highway touched. Doug had collected two serfs to help him carry the pieces from the van across the rough ground to the house; Henry Endellion, a burly, grizzled gardener-fisherman, with a perpetual smile puckering his good-tempered features; and Jo Percy Jeyne, fisherman-gardener, and sexton and water-carrier in his spare time, a solemn anxious little old man, gnarled with the years. The van-men unloaded at the cross-roads, but refused to do any carrying; and the rain striped heavily on the comically absorbed trio, Doug and Endellion and Jo Percy Jeyne, who, with sacking over their shoulders, and maintaining exactly the same pace and regular distance one from the other, strode and trudged and trotted in Indian file to and fro between the van and Grey Stone. Ursula and Mrs. Endellion—Harry’s wife—stood ready to receive the articles as they were brought in, and to direct their destination; but Doug’s briefly Napoleonic: “My cabin” occurred so often that Ursula gave up her mild attempt to divert the flow of all that was most useful and precious into the small ground-floor room behind the big living-room. After a couple of hours steady work, the empty van drove away, the last splashed and dripping chair was carried in; the rain stopped; and the stolid children from the cove who had been lurking all the morning among the bushes near the house, some hiding, some

claiming bold-eyed their right to satisfy curiosity, now scampered back to St. Miniot to report to their mothers exactly what the Barrisons had bought at St. Pol, and how many rugs, mattresses, saucepans and teacups they possessed.

"Thank you, my men!" said Doug, dismissing his serfs in what Ursula termed his most hearty "leggings-and-landowner" voice. "Here's something to drink my health in!"

To which Endellion and Jo Percy Jeyne, to remain strictly in character, ought to have responded with: "Three cheers fur t'squoire!" and danced off left and right, to the ivied inn. Reality, however, prompted them to remain, and separately and argumentatively point out that five shillings was not enough pay for a full morning's heavy work. . . .

"I'm enjoying this," Doug remarked, sitting on a packing-case and biting at a cold pasty Mrs. Endellion had brought him. "Aren't you, Teddy?"

"No. Not a bit. I feel like somebody in *Funny Chips*. . . . Presently you'll try and hang a picture up, and hit your thumb."

"Why, my dear old kid, I once chopped half a finger off, rigging up a store-hut in a blizzard!" Doug laughed boisterously at the recollection.

"I'm sure you did. . . . I've got a sort of creepy suspicion that the Abbotts are going to turn up at Parc Gooth for the night."

"What if they do? Abbott's a plausible old

rogue—simply dripping with humbug. I like him awfully."

"Do you think he had a right to sell his lease to Wenn? Or ought we to have let the Allingham-Joneses look over the place?—but then there was Miss Gregson's telegram. . . ." Ursula's eyes brooded in deep shadow. "And Wright said. . . . Oh, I hate it all!"

"Nothing to do with us. Why should you hate it? Women——"

"Doug, a woman is *never* just women——"

"——always get cross, moving," finished Doug, who, never cross or snappish or irritable himself, presented a surface like the wrong sort of matchbox on which these special qualities would not effectively strike. "Come on, Teddy, be a sport, and help me with my cabin," he concluded, at his last mouthful of pasty. He leaped to his feet, and jumped over an oak chest and part of a dresser, which happened to be blocking his way.

By tea-time, his cabin was in beautiful order and ready for occupation.

"Do you think we might spare a few minutes now for the other rooms?" Ursula suggested petulantly.

But Doug was occupied in lining the drawers of his desk with paper; he announced, absently, that the job would take him some time, and after that, of course, he must give his tools a rub up before stowing them away in the oak chest which he was going to bring down from their bedroom after all. . . .

"Yes," said Ursula. "I'm going home."

He nodded, absorbed, breathing very hard; his hair was tousled and his bare knees dirty and bruised. Ursula told Mrs. Endellion to rouse him in a couple of hours, to lock up; and went.

[XI]

A SEA fog had crept up after the sting of hot sunshine which followed the rain, and stifled it. When Ursula had walked a few paces from Grey Stone, the solid world was melted to clammy vapour. The siren at Polpinnock Head was emitting at regular intervals a sound comparable to that of a wolf in Northern Canada who, after four months' winter starvation, smells faintly his first caribou, and then discovers he has a stiff leg. Ursula slipped along, huddling her mind against the wraiths of dreariness and fear. The invisible sea fell back from the rocks below with a sulky gurgle and suck.

Nearing the village, she heard occasional steps around her, and once or twice a foolish laugh . . . and all the while, like a forlorn child, she was repeating to herself, "I want to run away—oh, I do want to run away," till the very rhythm of the phrase soothed her.

Parc Gooth seemed full of angry people. The Abbotts' jingle stood outside; and within, the Abbotts were backing the claims of a melancholy veteran with a long beard and an American accent, against Tody,

whose mysterious other Todys were rapidly multiplying in his speech. The Allingham-Joneses had penetrated to upstairs, and were critically investigating the bedrooms. And two telegrams addressed to Barrison, and signed Lacey, announced that Major Allingham-Jones was by signed agreement the next in succession at Parc Gooth, after June 24th. Bewildered by the sudden clamour and rivalry, on top of her silent walk from Grey Stone, Ursula went into the kitchen, where Mrs. Tody respectfully murmured: “I can’t get tea till Mr. Wenn comes out o’ the pantry, please madam, if you don’t mind!”

“Are they here yet?” stammered Wenn in answer to Ursula’s mocking inquiries.

“Quite a lot of people are here. Can I send anybody to interview you? The bearded gentleman, for instance——”

“That’s Mr. Van Lou, what I’m letting this place to,” Wenn explained truculently. “No”—with a cautious drop in his tone—“it’s Miss Gregson and her Eye-talian that I don’t want to see. They were up tu Wright’s at noon—tes all over the village that they’m back again. And I don’t like ‘em, Mrs. Barrison.”

Ursula shrugged her shoulders. Then, as her ear caught an unfamiliar note in the added hubbub in the hall, she suggested mischievously: “Come out and tell them so. Here they are, back in their old home. . . .”

Wenn shrank limply against the wall. His knees gave. “It’s none o’ my business, letting this house.

You'll tell them so, Mrs. Barrison? If Abbott sells his lease to me, then Abbott's my landlord, and there's no need for me to talk to any one else about it. I'm best where I am, minding my own business without interfering. . . ."

"You're a blustering coward without even the courage of your own villainies," Ursula sweetly informed him, losing in that one minute all dread of Wenn as a sinister personage. "If any one asks me, I shall say you're hiding in the pantry." And she left him.

In the hall, a broad-shouldered woman with cropped grey hair and sturdy features was abusing Mrs. Abbott, whose frequent titters were eerily at variance with her wizened miserable expression. A supple, olive-skinned man lounged gracefully against the balustrade beside them. His vague sweet smile embraced all humanity.

"How do you do, Mrs.—" Ursula stopped short, for though she had constantly heard the pair referred to, like a performing troupe, as "Miss Gregson and her Eye-talian," she had no idea of Miss Gregson's married name.

"How do you do. You, of course, are Mrs. Barrison. Whose house is this?"

"Mine." Miss Gregson triumphantly answered her own question before Ursula or Mrs. Abbott had time to offer an opinion.

"Most kindly," interposed Mr. Abbott, "we took it off your hands on a seven years' lease, when—ah—

an unpopular marriage decided you to quit the neighbourhood.”

The Eye-talian beamed.

“I didn’t decide. We were kicked out,” Miss Gregson said bluntly. “I’ve not had any rent from you yet—that’s my trouble.”

“And I have not had any rent from the Laceys, to whom I sub-let it for three years, because, owing to alien interference, they sent the rent straight to you, to whom it was not due . . . I’m mentioning no names,” finished Mrs. Abbott with a sardonic salute to the absent Mr. Wright.

“And pray, to whom did *you* pay the rent?” the Oliver-Cromwellian lady demanded of Ursula, who bowed her small gold head reverently and replied: “To God . . .” and then ran with swift step upstairs, pursued by Abbott’s fat chuckle. She found Major Allingham-Jones minutely interested in the furnishings of her bedroom.

“Are those duns downstairs?” he snapped inquisitively. “D’you owe ’em money? Can’t you get rid of ’em? Who’s the fat fellow? Who’s the Dago draped over the balustrade? Who’s——”

“They are all, more or less, landlords of this house. Perhaps, if you still feel inclined to rent it, you’d do well to consult some of them.”

“But—bless me—my dear young woman—I *have* rented it. Came to an agreement with Lacey about it, by post, only yesterday. He said he’d wire you.

I say, where does your husband keep his clothes, if you stuff up all this chest of drawers with yours? And why his brushes on top? But before you tell me, I'll just come downstairs and turn these impostors out."

"Do." Ursula led the way. Mrs. Allingham-Jones drifted out of Tody's bedroom, and joined them.

The tide of battle seemed to have rolled out on to the front lawn, where, dim legendary figures swirled about with fog, Tody argued with the American:

"I'm going to live right here, and I'm going to be buried right *here*," the American stated firmly, indicating his future grave by driving his stick into a portion of the sod directly blocking the entrance to Parc Gooth. And he walked away towards the vegetable garden; Tody, black with grievances, at his heels; Miss Gregson and her Eye-talian, the Abbotts, and Ursula with Major and Mrs. Allingham-Jones, following Tody.

"Tody has his duty to do towards the lady and gentleman, and if aught goes wrong wi' things it's Tody's fault. Tody has nothing against the gentleman, nothing at all, he may be a very nice gentleman, but when Tody's orders are to let the house to no one but under Mr. Lacey's written orders, and the gentleman and lady arrive with the letter in their pockets, it isn't that Tody favours the gentleman and lady any more than this gentleman, but fair's fair and a promise a promise, leastways when Tody promises——"

"I've just taken a fancy to this place." The

American passed like a weary steamroller over Tody's eloquence and crushed it. “And I'm tired of moving about; I'm going to stay here an' live here and not shift away from here, and be buried right *here* . . . and again he selected a portion of ground and drove his stick among the lettuces. “Now,” glaring defiantly at the surrounding company, “if any one would care to see my bank-book, or my cheque-book, my letters of credit, and the first half-year's rent, whatever you like to make it, *down* in notes, why, I've got the lot on me right now.” It was easy to see what had fascinated Wenn in this prospective tenant. “Where's the guy who's let me this house? he came here with me, but I haven't seen his face round, lately.”

“Mr. Wenn is hiding in the pantry,” said Ursula.

“Wenn!” Miss Gregson now became excited. “Wenn's an old enemy of mine. How did he come to be letting my house?”

“Forgive me—mine,” contradicted Mr. Abbott, flushed but caressingly gentle. “For the next five and a half years, mine.”

Ursula rather admired the old outlaw playing his wits against the multitude. He was not unromantic, in spite of his dingy felt hat pushed to the back of his head, and his wary, mischievous eyes behind their round spectacles. Young dark-bearded captains may have sailed for the Spanish Main with the same spirit of contempt for safe conformity as the Abbotts clambered into their creaking precarious

jingle. Thus musing, Ursula missed Miss Gregson's answering speech, which was a pity, as it summed up in brisk sentences the whole of her past relations with the Abbotts, material and moral, including an account of what she had believed them to be, and what she had since discovered in their overwhelming disfavour.

Suddenly a young Endellion—the village swarmed with them—popped like a goblin from a hole in the fog, handed Ursula yet another telegram, and disappeared again. She read it aloud:

“Allingham-Jones has my authority to occupy Parc Gooth from to-morrow.

“LACEY.”

Silence . . . and then a hubbub of mingled exostulation and jubilance broke out. Ursula darted away from conflict, into the house, into the pantry, and seized the cowering Wenn by the arm:

“You’ve got to come out and face it.”

“I—I—ted’n no business of mine.”

“Yes, it is. Your tenant is burying himself all over the garden. Come out.” He stood petrified, but she dragged him along with her. . . .

Nobody in the garden. No human voice. The white mist was clotted densely where Tody and the Major, Miss Gregson and her Eye-talian, the Abbotts and the mournful American, had stood disputing in all languages, three minutes before. All gone. A spell might have broken loose from ancient Cornish

magic, and, drifting that way, enchanted them into bramble-bushes. Only the siren at Polpinnock Head still hooted dolorously, and at the high bend of the invisible road, a ghostly jingle rattled on its way.

Wenn sighed with relief: “I’ll be getting along home,” he said, “these damp fogs, they gnaw into my bones. . . . We fixed that matter up all right, Mrs. Barrison—I like to be friends with everybody. . . .” And he, too, departed.

[XII]

HALF an hour later, Doug returned from Grey Stone.

“My cabin looks top-hole,” he began enthusiastically. “I say, who d’you think’s here? Miss Gregson and her Eye-talian. They’re in the bar-parlour of the ‘Dog and Pilchard,’ lapping up hot whisky as pally as anything with those Allingham-Jones people and a fellow with a long beard and an American twang. I dropped in for a drink on my way home from Grey Stone. This infernal fog—it’s like breathing damp wool—I expect they’ll all be rolling up here presently. I say, Teddy, you should see my cabin now——”

“We’ve got to get away from here,” said Ursula, speaking quietly, but with a steady taut unreason which was her form of hysteria. “I don’t care where we go or what we leave behind, but I’m not going to settle down. Things grow over us . . . here. Parc

Gooth—I've got Parc Gooth on the brain. Stuck there like a burr. Let's go tonight, Doug—please. . . . Oh, *please* let's go tonight."

"My dear old kid," Doug began. Then: "You're tired out. Moving's the devil. I'm going to carry you upstairs and put you to bed! And if you want a good cry, you shall have it." He advanced towards her, large and ruddy and cheerful, his arms outstretched. Ursula shrank.

"I'm not going to be put to bed, and I'm nowhere near a good cry. Don't you understand, Doug, that we're in danger—deadly danger. I'm not just being womanish. We were wrong to come here. At least, it was my fault—I was wrong. I'm owning it. We're too young to live in the country where it's peaceful . . . where it isn't peaceful, and only looks it. At first I thought everybody rather quaint and amusing, with their quaint, rigid little prejudices. But I'm frightened of them now; they're not our *kind* of people, down in the country. They'll never grow like us, but we might grow like them . . . we'd have to pretend to, to start with, because they're here first, and they won't budge in the way they think and behave. Can't and won't. But we're too tolerant and broad-minded and we have such a sense of humour. . . . Oh, yes, we can afford to pretend and to adjust ourselves and to be flexible—it's fatally easy. Doug, I'm just now more interested than in anything else in the world, to hear what Jeyne of the 'Dog and Pilchard' will probably tell his brother-in-law,

Harry Endellion, about what Miss Gregson said to the Allingham-Joneses, and whether it was Wright who warned her to come down, and why and what he gets out of it. Doesn't that prove to you it's serious and that we *must* go?"

Doug had one fixed conviction, and he brought it forth now:

"My dear old kid, you'll feel different in the morning."

"I know I will. More settled down. That's just it—that's just it—that's why we've got to go now, while I've still got the desire, and before I begin to feel different. . . ."

"Don't be absurd, Teddy." Her husband walked up and down the verandah with truculent strides. "Go? Run away? Give up Grey Stone and everything? When my cabin looks so jolly?"

Ursula was fighting hard . . . and she saw that Doug had not even realized why and for what she was fighting. Subtlety prompted her to take a line which she knew would make a powerful appeal to him.

"You're not the sort of man to be held down by furniture, Doug. Just because we moved into a house today—that's no reason why we shouldn't up stakes tomorrow. Furniture means comfort . . . and deep down in our hearts we're buccaneers!"

Doug wavered. . . . Had it not been for the memory of some jolly little contrivances he had that afternoon fixed up in his cabin—a hammock, for instance, ingeniously slung to a stout beam by cords, so that

he could haul it up to the ceiling and out of the way when not in use—oh, and a ship's bell, rusty but with a throat of sonorous silver, had it not been for these, he might have been tempted by the idea of behaving so like a buccaneer, a roystering, stout-hearted, easy-come-and-easy-go sort of fellow, as to quit harbour the very day of anchoring. But that hammock—and the bell—it would be a shame not to use them. He had not told Ursula about them, meaning to surprise her. But now he poured out a full description: ". . . And the point is, Teddy, it's a dinkum naval hammock—the genuine thing—canvas, you know. They're not easy to get, but a chap I once knew in the merchant service had a brother who was ships-chandler on the quay at St. Pol . . . I remembered, and slipped off there while you were bargaining for that gate-legged table. And he sold me the bell, too—a real beauty—about ten bobs' worth of silver in it. Nothing much to look at, of course. You'll see; I'm not going to have any clocks at all at Grey Stone, but sound the four bells and eight bells—dong—dong—dong—dong—'All's . . . well!'"

And Ursula, defeated by the sheer stupefying force of little boys at their games, laid her head down on her arms and laughed and cried and cried; knowing well that now she would have to surrender and remain in Arcadia; knowing well that if you make your bed and do not want to lie on it, you need not; but if it be a double bed, and you have made it, and your

partner will not stir, you must lie on it too. It was she, and not Doug, who had proposed their present sharp severance from Town and the Knapsack Club and all the other ties. And now they would never escape, never. . . . Nor again might she sufficiently want to escape.

“Teddy, Teddy darling, don’t cry. It’s only a mood—I’ve had ‘em myself. . . . That damned hooter at Polpinnock! I’ll hot you up a toddy of rum and milk—a chap I knew at the Knapsack smuggled me through a demi-john of the real stuff from Jamaica. And honestly, you’ll feel different in the morning. . . .”

[XIII]

AND in the morning Ursula did feel different. So different that she went up to Mr. Wright’s shop, on the pretext of buying matches and soap and a bucket; and there heard the secret history of the evening before. Mr. Wright’s beard was very knowing and triumphant over it all; and he was able to enlighten Ursula as to the mysterious vanishings after she had run into the house to fetch out Wenn from the pantry. Miss Gregson’s Eye-talian, it appeared, had coughed, and she, fearing for his Southern lungs exposed to the sea-mists, had hurried him to the “Dog and Pilchard” for a fiery drink; whereupon the American had invited the rest of the company likewise to come down into the warm bar-

parlour, and there further to negotiate the matter of Parc Gooth over glasses of hot whisky. The Allingham-Joneses had accepted; but old Abbott and his wife, possibly realizing that—in melodramatic parlance—their game was up, had silently detached themselves from the others, and driven off in their jingle. . . . The voice of Tody, however, penetrated at intervals from the public bar, beyond the glass door, in disjointed confidences to Jeyne the landlord—"the lady and gentleman" occurred frequently in his narration, and "Tody" and Tody and Tody and Tody. . . .

"And what's the upshot?" Ursula asked. "Who's going to have Parc Gooth?"

It was one of the glowing moments which made Mr. Wright's drab life worth the living:

"I don't think Major Allingham-Jones will live there, Mrs. Garrison," mysteriously.

"The American, then? Wenn's man?"

The grocer shook his head . . . took down some boxes from the shelf and put them back again; opened the door which separated his parlour from the shop, and called to his daughter: "Alice, have you gone yet? . . . Oh, she has. Yes. Well, Mrs. Garrison, I'll tell you this, knowing it'll go no further, for the people here are so ignorant that they believe a man's always pushing his own trade interests when he simply wants to befriend some one; and it would be awkward for me if my name was to be mixed up in this. Very awkward. I'm in a difficult position,

you see, not being a native of the place. And they're already saying it must have been somebody who wrote to Miss Gregson putting her on her guard. And though I remind them, carelessly, if you follow me, that the Vicar had her address as well as myself——"

George Sampson hobbled into the shop. Recognizing Ursula, he saluted her, his wistful, threadbare look holding no malice for her patronage of the rival stores. "Good day to 'ee, Mrs. Barrison. Fine weather after the fog. Wright, is it true what they'm sayin' down tu Cove?—that Miss Gregson and her Eye-talian are comin' back for good to live at Parc Gooth?"

"Oh!" Ursula cried in amazement.

Mr. Wright stood with rigidly guarded countenance, examining his stock of gingham aprons.

"I can't help being sorry, in a way, that the American gentleman's not going to live there," Sampson went on. "Heaps o' money 'e has, heaps; an' he told me he was goin' to divide his custom fair between you an' me——"

But Wright still said nothing. All Miss Gregson's custom went to him.

Ursula ought to have been up at Grey Stone by now, but she lingered on in the shop, absorbed, anxious to hear more. . . .

PART IV
THE GIRL IN THE ROOM

IT was Ursula's way to endure haphazard circumstances quietly and dreamily, for years; and then, inspired and shaken by sudden fierce impatience, to spring at them. For just beyond drastic alteration, just beyond the limit of things wrong, lay that right and glorious world for which she ached . . . where whatever you did, you keenly wanted to do; where no time was wasted in sitting about among people whose speech and habits recurred monotonously from day to day; where the air was sharp and golden as early morning in early summer. . . .

Oh, merely this world, this ordinary old world, but twisted round from hatefulness because you dared to twist it. . . . Surely those moments, rare and swift, when you were amazingly happy, confident, bewitched, and for no reason at all, surely, Ursula had argued once with Aunt Lavvy, they could be made permanent, if you could once find out the cause of them? And Aunt Lavvy with a wise little smile had lent her Maeterlinck's "Blue Bird."

Ursula groaned, but inwardly, for at this moment she worshipped Aunt Lavvy. "The Blue Bird"—the few pages she read of it were not bad; but the fairy-tale "humble cottage" of Tyltyl had seemed

to have practically no connection with "The Laburnums." Some people thought everything could be answered with a book. Ursula preferred, however, to puzzle and experiment without guides bound in soft calf.

She had given up her room at home, hoping, in her impatience of days that were nothing special, with people who were burdened with false small misunderstandings as a dog is burdened with a tin can tied round its neck, that thus she might force access to a kingdom of perpetual ecstasy. She had given up the room . . . and that was all there was to it. Sullenly she discounted sacrifice—and also, with the iconoclasm of sixteen-and-a-half, religion—"it all amounts to the same!"

And for a couple of years she was acquiescent; a schoolgirl, forgetting to wish madly to change things—change them and change them—a saraband defying stagnancy. Then Doug came . . . and Doug talked . . . and all the world was a romantic platitude of lagoons, and moonlight, and the domes and minarets of Eastern cities, quays of Rio, humming-birds and flying fish, and stars blazing on a phosphorescent sea. Doug-land. His richly-coloured wooing had dwindled her loss of the room to a size unimportant and of no significance; a small shabby bedroom with outlook on to a cistern and a wall—what a silly fuss her spirit had made of it! The after spectacle of her husband falling freshly in love each time he happened to see

a moderately attractive girl crossing the room, began, after several years, to impress Ursula as again something ugly and unnecessary enough for another wild spurt of divine interference. "Divine" to be interpreted not as humble prayer for intercession from the skies; but as that sudden wrath which burst from her, and "chucked the furniture about!" as she once expressed it.

The result of furniture-chucking, in this instance, was their removal to Arcadia.

Now, in August of that summer, Ursula, lying on a flat rock at the base of the cliffs nearly level with the sea, realized that she had not even seen Arcadia, for the Arcadians.

The Arcadians—and Doug.

Doug came between her and the sky-line. She saw it over his shoulder.

She looked around her, in search of that balm which is said to be concealed in beauty: sea . . . yes, green—a great many greens. But what is green, after all, without hysteria to describe it in simile and rapture? And the royal moors turned back in brocaded purple from the top of the cliff.

"‘Royal’ and ‘brocaded’ are affectation," murmured Ursula. "At least—I don’t know—I suppose I’m tired."

She may well have been tired; for Doug, of late, had been most abnormally fit. The open-air life agreed with him—he positively zig-zagged health from all angles of his body, like the gentleman in

magazine advertisements. His energy ran over and spilt itself in all directions; he raced and jumped and bathed and dived and climbed, and leapt three times backwards and forwards over a stile, where once would have done; he talked louder than usual, because he had so much abundant voice left over from ordinary talking. And all this exercise gave him appetite for huge meals, and the huge meals built up his strength for further superlative exercise; he dragged Ursula out for long, rough, cross-country walks in all weathers, but preferably during the cold rainy spells which whipped June into July that year. Wraps he forbade, because of a certain fetish called "hardening"; he himself strode exultantly through all weathers, clad in loose cotton shirts and footer shorts; the skin of his knees, chest and arms, burnt to a crude mahogany, were his perpetual delight and boast. He did not sit—he flung himself down; he did not stand—he leapt to his feet. A portion of his left-over vitality after a stiff morning's farm-work, he worked off on a patter-shuffle-clog-dance of his own invention; a little more, on the unwearied training of his dog to impossibilities. His dog was a good-looking young wire-haired terrier; a living affirmative of the axiom that the dog is the dumb devoted friend of man, but a stubborn contradiction of the further proposition that the dog is an intelligent beast. Rough was a fool, and most anxious to please Doug. For hours at a stretch, he strode beside Ursula across the moors, "training"

Rough to follow. "Rough—Rough—good dog—hi—here—drop that—to heel, I say—heel—heel . . . good dog . . . good little fellow. . . . Rough (Sorry darling, what were you saying?)—Hi—Rough—here, I say. . . ."

Nor did his vigour content itself without battering on all the doors of Ursula's life—"Ouvre moi ta porte, pour l'amour de Dieu"—like Love-locked-out fortified by Sanatogen!

"We must be all-in-all to each other, Teddy!" he declared again and again. And: "Tell me what you're thinking about!"

Discovering, surprised, at this period, that her shyness resented his loving "stand and deliver" attitude—for she had thought shyness was over long ago—she invented a reserve store of thoughts that would do well enough for these occasions. Thoughts not too obvious—sometimes she became quite interested in them as they unwound into speech. . . .

"What are you thinking of, Teddy?" Doug flopped out of the sea, and lay in a damp glow beside her on the rock.

Ursula considered him attentively, then she said: "Anyone can bask, after a bathe, in hot sunshine; but it takes you to bask in a cutting wind under a grey sky."

"Oh, I'm most tremendously fit," replied Doug. "At least—I'm normal. One ought always to feel like this; everybody ought. It's their own fault if they don't. Why didn't you dip today, Teddy?"

Where's the old Ruffian? What were you thinking about just before I came out?"

"About the Watsons," said Ursula convincingly; "I was wondering why Stanley's idea of a holiday was to shave only twice a week, and wear a collar and no tie, and a pencil still clipped to his waist-coat pocket."

"I think he cast his tie out of compliment to me," laughed Doug; "but his respectability still clung to the neat collar-stud and efficient pencil! He did rather upset the scenery whenever he appeared. The kids were jolly, though—especially the one with the idiot name; she was a real little sport in the water!"

Grace and Stanley, with Gums, the four children and Lottie, had recently returned to "Merlin's Isle" at Buckler's Cross, after a month's painstaking holiday enriching Mr. Wenn at the Polpinnock Temperance Hotel. They were very disappointed that Grey Stone had not been able to accommodate them all. "Poor Ursula will be glad to have some of her own family around her," Grace had explained their choice of a place to Miss Roberts. "A husband isn't like a sister, after all."

"Not in the least," Miss Roberts agreed fervently. "And I've always longed to see some really *wild* country. . . ." In fact, she was positively disappointed when the country of Morcar did not rise and spring at her.

Ursula did indeed welcome Grace and Lottie warmly. But she would have preferred a visit from

Bunny, who, following his destiny, was now black-sheeping it in New Zealand.

"Auntie Teddy, what does father mean when he says Uncle Bunny'll never be anything but a Mittens Man," Freda, the youngest niece, had inquired.

Ursula forthwith sought out Stanley and hotly tackled him.

"Look here, Stanley, why do you label poor old Bunny a remittance man?"

"My dear Ursula, I don't want my children to grow up believing there's anything advisable in not sticking to their home and jobs." But he re-told the anecdote of the Mittens Man with considerable pride and relish to any one trapped to listen by his offhand: "Rather a smart thing I heard a kid say the other day. Well, as a matter of fact, it was my own youngster—"

Perhaps her brother-in-law's measured patronage of the rocks and coves, their formation, their antiquity, their historical interest and their effect upon his own psychology (*a*) where they exceeded expectations and (*b*) where they fell below it, had something to do with Ursula's present apathy towards nature. A yet sadder spectacle was a genial Stanley going about among the fishermen and palling up with them, punning hearty puns to suit their intelligence, or listening with deliberate respect to their views on politics—"You know, Barrison, sometimes these chaps say something worth hearing. They *think*, you know!"

"God, what a stumor!" was Doug's final verdict on Stanley, as the train from Gullick bore him away, with his womenfolk.

"Well, I'm going to take old Rough for another swim; it freshens him up." Doug poised for an instant in clean outline against the dark waves, and then plunged, followed in untidy, spluttering fashion by his dog, who detested the water, and only went in uttering sharp yelps of anguish because he believed each time that Doug was in the extremities of a life-and-death struggle.

Ursula watched the pair till they disappeared round the headland which jutted from the opposite side of the cove. Doug was swimming magnificently; he was certainly in superb physical condition. . . . And so ready for a romantic episode, that he was only kept from it by the sheer fact of no accessible girl—"And that's a fact which can't go on for ever," mused Ursula.

So she had achieved nothing more than false security, by their withdrawal to loneliness and the country. He was bursting to talk of Doug-land and the horizon that pulled and pulled, to some one—not herself, oh, not herself!—to some one fresh and tremulous, who would say "we mustn't, Doug . . ." and long for such a ringing love-adventure with so superb a hero.

It must come some time, sooner or later; Ursula knew she could not always strain to hold at arms-length the inevitable meeting. She had mistaken

delay for prevention. But she had not altered Doug.

The very next girl.

"Ahoy—y—y!" Doug was exultantly calling her attention to himself from the opposite headland of rock. Sure of his audience, he treated her to a careless ripple of his muscles, then stood taut and dived. His black head reappeared on the surface several yards nearer to her.

"Oh—he does want his nice bran-new romance!" And with that, her sense of property flared up to a fierce height. You ought never to have to give up what has once been yours. Not a room nor a husband; and not the illusion that whatever sudden change you make in your life, is the right change.

The very next girl.

[II]

URSULA began to think quite a lot about her intangible rival. Then to be irritated by her. If she could have fixed her mind on a certain definite personality—been jealous of it, she might have wrestled better with jealousy than now, when compelled to alter over and over again the shape and colour of a girl, the way she moved, and the intonations of her voice, to alter all these and twist them a thousand times, and then destroy the revision and throw the whole girl away and pick up a totally different one.

All that Ursula knew for certain was that the girl would come. And that this anticipation of her, the wondering and the waiting, was a thousand times more torturing than the actual spectacle of Doug in the throes of an episode. This one, which perforse was bound to overtake him, had gained importance by the elaborate way in which she had drawn him to step backward and backward from it.

One morning at breakfast, Doug said unexpectedly:

"Teddy, d'you remember the reason why we chucked everything and came to live here?"

"Yes. . . ."

"Hasn't it worked splendidly?" He jumped a chair which stood between them, and coming up behind her, gripped her shoulders. She twisted round to face him, smiling a little. "It's safe to talk of a cure now, isn't it, Teddy? Middle of August—we've been here four—five—let me see, end of March—four-and-a-half months. And all this time, have you had any trouble with me at all? Trouble of the old kind——?" His blue eyes twinkled mischievously. "It was a tremendous experiment, and it's been a success. Behold the unsusceptible Douglas!" He struck a mock heroic attitude; and, glancing upwards, discovered that it was possible to swing by the hands from the thick overhead beams from which hams and joints used to dangle when the whole lower half of Grey Stone had been a kitchen. So he swung by the hands, thor-

oughly enjoying it. And Ursula, as a matter of habit, made everybody's indulgent remark to him: "What a great boy you are still, Doug!"

He grinned, gratified. Then, as he nearly always did, dropped from buffoonery to a gruffer and more sincere note: "I'm not proud of my—my—well, what I used to be, because I joke about it, Teddy. And I didn't talk of it before because I wanted to be sure"—and also because he had forgotten! "Men live a hectic artificial life in towns, and their will-power gets jaded. My will-power is tremendous now. . . ." He lunged forward with his right arm, in proof of it, and then slowly bent back the forearm, admiring his biceps. "You feel safe about me now, don't you, Teddy old girl?"

"So safe," said Ursula, quite suddenly resolved that she would rather materialize her shadowy fear and actually cope with it on the premises, than watch its approach, wondering when, wondering how it would all happen to hurt her—"so safe, that I'm going to invite an awfully nice kid down to stay with us for a bit. No, it's not just to test you, though, as you say, it proves that our experiment has been a success; but I'm getting fed up with my own company, with you such a lot up at the farm. Do you remember little Christine Powys, at the boarding-house? she hinted she'd love a holiday with us in Morcar—at least, she didn't hint, she quite frankly asked, but I dared not promise it to her, then." She selected at random the very first girl who came into her head.

Christine Powys—round dark head—tomboyish ways—she would do . . . or another. Whoever it was—Doug's next romance. And Ursula's hot searching mind craved to fix itself on one actual face and name, and banish to rest all the rivals in the realms of perhaps. One girl—all girls. . . . Well, Christine was one girl, the very first girl for Doug to meet, after his "cure." Yes, Christine would do.

Thus Ursula, again impatient, again played understudy to the Deity.

"Christine Powys? No, I don't remember. Where did she sit?"

"Over by the door. With grandfather and an aunt. They came about three weeks before we left."

"Did they?" Doug had been absorbed by Doreen then. "I'll take your word for it. Anyway, if this Christine of yours is to be solemnly applied like a thermometer to my temperature——"

"Don't be a goose, Doug"—lightly.

Unsuspecting, he kissed her and departed to work.

Ursula wrote her letter. And then went up to the room above the cabin; down three solid but uneven stairs that cut it off from the rest of the cottage. . . . The door was thick, too. Beyond it, loneliness could come true. It had amused Ursula to furnish the room as much as possible like the one she had lost to Aunt Lavvy, only in creamy white—walls, bed, hangings. But the two windows were full of sea in the daytime; and the lamp had a round silk shade, rich gold as an October moon. The floor

was covered by a rug of some animal with coarse white fur.

"I'd have liked it . . ." murmured Ursula. She sat down on the edge of the bed . . . then saw herself merely preparing to be wistful, and hastily went for a tramp into St. Miniot, to see Miss Gregson, now established with her barely-tolerated Eye-talian at Parc Gooth.

Her brother Louis was staying with her; a short, ugly, dandified man. Ursula disliked his clipped black moustache which lay too high above his lips; disliked his deliberately experienced glance at her; disliked his sophisticated conversation, which held such gems as: "All women want until they cease to want, and then they want more!" When she departed, he said with affected abruptness: "When we meet again—we must talk together."

[III]

CHRISTINE POWYS wrote: "May I really, really come next week already? May I? Oh, it is jolly decent of you. This place is like hell in summer—it stinks of cats. Only we can't afford to get away. Yesterday I was so fed up with it that I picked the green paint blisters off the front door like I used to when I was about four. . . ."

They met her at Gullick with Champion's car. She wore a very woolly white sweater and cap, and short plaid skirt, and had dabbed her mouth with in-

congruous scarlet—"Sweater to show us she knows how to dress for the sea—poor hot child! skirt, the plaid of no clan that was ever invented. Lip-salve? Subconscious tribute to Doug already. . . . I wonder?" But on second thoughts Ursula decided it was probably because Christine's greatest pal at the boarding-house was just then using lip-salve—"she'll leave it off after she's been with me twenty-four hours, and take to some of my tricks instead."

Christine was attractive, though, in the Pierrot style. Her black hair was cut smooth and round to her head as the top of a penny bun. The lashes of her big brown eyes curled up inquiringly, and so did her ridiculously short soft nose of which the three-cornered nostrils lay almost flat to her face. A very long upper lip lent her expression an air of incredibly droll rougery. Her rounded cheeks were scarlet with excitement, but dimmed by the powdery bloom which dims and transfigures very ripe fruit and very young cherubim. A round curling mouth and a round babyish chin completed the resemblance to a Pierrot who pleads sometimes in the moonlight for love—and sometimes crudely on the pier for pennies. In fact, there was quite a lot of the pier about Christine. But:

"Help!" thought Ursula, "I'm going to like her!"

With which brief expostulation of horror, she sat down to watch the tragi-comedy she had with such reckless lordliness prepared for herself.

It all happened quite amusingly. For within a

few hours Doug capitulated; and Ursula, tranquilly studying him, was able to mark exactly how many days later he acknowledged the truth to himself. Roughly, about five. He concealed his fall from Ursula, of course; and successfully, he had not a doubt. But his long period of immunity from romantic episode had doubled its present intensity, so that he believed as never before it was *the* romantic episode, and he had to curb himself from shouting robust oaths at Ursula, who alone stood between him and the lagoons, etc., with Christine.

Christine had no chance of resistance from the very beginning. Boarding-house life, and a mysterious wave of feeling called "the modern tendency," had weakened the tradition which used to exist for the protection of maidens of eighteen from foolishness, that a married man was "no good." And Doug, bare-throated, and with hefty brown knees, was surely large and splendid as never man had been before. "How funny I never noticed him at the boarding-house!"

And as it happened, that little shut-off white room which overhung the sea was "sort of perfect" in which to spend nights with a tremulous coloured dream. . . . At the boarding-house Christine shared a room with her aunt. But here—

The world glowed and was strange . . . "as though some one had turned it over on to its right side," murmured Christine, glad, nevertheless, that her friend Gladys Willoughby, who was scornful and

disillusioned and a cynic and used lip-salve (Ursula was right), could not know she was making an idiot fool of herself—enjoying being alone with the thin banjo note of the cricket in the grass below her window.

“I’m right and Gladys is wrong!” Christine discovered . . . and was happier still.

Of course she did not know yet that Doug cared for her. But she had noticed some odd characteristics of his: the way, for instance, in the middle of his care-free rollicking nonsense, he would suddenly add something in quite a different voice—and then break off . . . he was one of those *real* men who find it difficult to show their feelings. “I expect he’s got a repression,” said sage Christine, to Christine her submissive and admiring confidante.

She lies in bed, clothes half tumbled off, innocent, sensuous, lulled by thoughts of a bewitched today—a boat with a brown sail drifts across her window, dips again behind the wall . . . her following eyes find it for yet an instant in the other window . . . pretty boat with a brown sail. . . . Christine, enamoured of tomorrow, drops asleep.

“DEAR OLD GLADYS,—I don’t know yet if I’ll say yes to an elopement with him—doesn’t that sound cool and depraved? But nowadays . . . You know, I was never sure if even the Barkers were properly married, and yet they were none the worse for it. But Doug is a bit of a dug-out in some ways (joke)—he hasn’t even kissed me yet, though

I can feel he's mad to. He's much too handsome to live, of course, but we've got over that phase when we much prefer an ugly man because they've 'got more in them'—anyway it was invented by the wife of a hideous old monster who was jealous of her best friend's husband. Ursula Barrison isn't a bad sort, but serene and innocent and a bit standoffish. To see Doug nobly struggling to get off with her is like a man warming himself at a fire that's gone out. Pretty smart, that—what? Oh, I'm coming on, Gladys my dear. No, there's no dancing-hall here, though Doug and I jazzed a bit last night. Send me another of those yellow Jap silk cammies, will you? They show so when one undresses, ducking up and down behind rocks. Pink's na-poo—only Fluffies wear pink, and I simply can't fluff. We caught thirty-seven mackerel yesterday; it was glorious fun. I'll let you know how things develop. . . . How's Mac, by the way? Yours,

"CHRIS."

She folded the sheet and put it in an envelope. Then, suddenly, she burst out crying:

"Oh God, oh, please, please, God—don't take it all away because I've written like that—it's not *done*, nowadays, to pray or—or be priggish—but don't, don't punish me over Douglas. . . . It's all so different and heavenly, and I love him, but I'm not sure even now if I believe in You."

Impulsively, she tore up the letter, and re-wrote it:

"DEAR OLD GLADYS,—Send me another of those yellow Jap silk cammies, will you? We caught thirty-seven mackerel yesterday; it was glorious fun. Write soon. How's Mac? No, there's no dancing here, worse luck! Yours,

"CHRIS."

There was nothing deliberately offensive to Gladys or to God in this compromise. Christine dared not risk upsetting God (if He existed) with her first letter. Nor dared she send Gladys—who was a rake and a cynic—the tumbled hymn and song and stutter of thanksgiving, which God (He must exist, if He sent me Douglas!) might commend as truthful.

[IV]

URSULA was jealous of Christine. Stretched and wry with jealousy. And especially of Christine going to bed down the passage and the three little steps, into her small room with the white walls, bearing Doug's good-night voice and look into solitude with her. Morning's awakening, to Ursula, was always a first sharp spring to the mind's realization of Christine's lazy, englamoured awakening in the room; and then a desperate longing to turn back, nauseated, from the flat, heavy day to come . . . to burrow her head once more into night's quiet dark wrappings. . . . until a shout from beside her, and a colossal leap and thump of bedclothes and Doug combined, on to the floor, proclaimed that her husband was awake and up, in full possession of his *joie de vivre*.

One afternoon on their way home from the cove, Doug and Christine quarreled:

“——I don't care. It is dirty to let a dog lick your mouth.”

"He jumps up. And anyway, it's not like a strange dog. Hi—Rough—Rough—good feller then——"

Rough, excited by his master's shouts and gesticulations, jumped again and again at Doug's face, with frantic, ill-directed dabs.

"It may not be a strange dog," Chris insisted, funnily fastidious on this point, "but the tongue he's licking you with has been in some damned strange places."

"I say, little girl, I—I wish you wouldn't swear."

"I wish you'd learn to be clean, then."

"Clean?"

"Men! They'd die if they missed their hot bath and their cold plunge and all the rest of it. Your sort of men." She rolled over from her back on to her front in the short grass dotted by Mrs. Thomas' second crop of haycocks; with chin propped in her hands, she gazed upwards at Doug, and perversely, from her happiness in him, tried anew to prod him to anger. "Baths aren't everything, when you let a horrid dog run about with his face in the dust and then let him—let him——" she was shy of using the word kiss again. "It's more than dirty, it's filthy," she finished, half crying with the queer rich excitement of being in love.

"What's the difference?" he teased her.

"Well," she laughed, "I'm dirty," displaying her small square-fingered hands glittering in the sun with sharp points of sand, for they had been making castles

in the cove; "I'm dirty, but I'm not filthy." The glowing September warmth, and Ursula's initiative, had led her to abandon her thick knitted sweaters, and to wear instead a short-sleeved butcher-blue jumper. Her thin brown legs were bare and also sandy, stretched carelessly from the shelter of her wriggled-up old skirt. Her skin was golden velvet where the glinting ladders of sunset fell across it. It was an oddly fascinating Pierrot-face turned up towards Doug, all bloom and roundness and impudence.

"You're sticky with sand," he informed her abruptly.

"'M. I know. It sticks to me. Good thing I've got hair like a boy, or it would be a mass of sand."

"Why don't you wear it short, but hanging soft and square round your cheeks, like girls do?"

"Mine only grows this shape," despondently.

"Poor little penny bun. Never mind—I like it." He looked down upon her tenderly . . . and cried out, in a harsh voice quite different from his own: "You *know*, Chris!" . . .

At that moment Louis Gregson sauntered round an adjacent haycock.

"Hullo, old man," cried Doug, who could never help being convivial, even to an intruder interrupting a scene which was obviously leading up to what Ursula called the lagoon speech. . . .

Louis nodded to him, sat down beside Chris, and in his cheap, deft, confidential fashion, caused her at once to feel especially feminine, each bit of her

separately, and all at once. She contrasted his carefully preserved dark moustache, his slight dapper figure, and eyes that were narrow and knowing, with her splendid Doug, tanned, athletic and burly, his boyish speeches blurted out heedless of consequences, his record as a wanderer and a scapegrace and a man of action. And because she was exulting in Doug, and her eyes hazed by magic, she did not understand that the epicure's treatment of her as a slight but not untantalizing Deauville episode, was in the least insulting.

Directly he left them: "Why do you let that bounder speak to you?" demanded Doug sternly.

"*Is he a bounder?*" in musing innocence. "I didn't let him speak to me. He spoke."

They quarrelled after that. And Doug went off sailing for the evening, and came home laden with mackerel and stiff with brine. His talk at late supper was spattered with fishing and ferocious weather technicalities, and well dashed with dialect. And afterwards, when he and Ursula went upstairs, he crushed strong arms around her and broke out:

"I'm fed up with this farming business, Teddy. Let's run away—just you and me—and breed dogs on the Yorkshire moors."

She brooded thoughtfully for a moment . . . and a little sigh shook her. Doug imagined it was a sigh of longing.

"Teddy," he whispered, "tell me what you're thinking of. Let's be all in all to each other again."

But Ursula had just made what was perhaps the most illuminating discovery of her married life.

That she was *still* jealous of Christine, alone in the room.

And yet—if she chose to make him so—Doug was hers, not Christine's. And after a while, Chris would be to him as Doreen, who was as Monica and Kitty . . . hardly even a memory! What phenomenal powers of oblivion this man possessed!

She realized that she must make some response, however idiotic.

"Yorkshire terriers, did you say, Doug?"

"No. Fussy little brutes. Bull-pups—or Great Danes—but they eat such a devil of a lot. A Swedish forester I once knew told me. . . ."

Then it was not because of Doug that she so thirstily envied the other girl. It was because of the room. It was because of—no Doug.

Ursula was breathless and aghast at what had taken place within herself. Up till now she had been genuinely unconscious that she had ceased to love her husband. She had suffered during the Doreen episode, during all the pre-Doreen episodes. And now here was Chris. . . .

Oh, lucky, lucky Chris. Curled up between white walls, in a kingdom of solitude in which romance happens, and sorrow can be hidden and cried over, and dreams build themselves, and joy is borne away and buried as a dog lovingly buries a bone among the warm straw in its kennel and all night long nuzzles

it and is glad of it; during the day thinks of it with sudden tiny ecstatic thrills as though it had whispered reminder. . . .

Funny little mysterious child curled up alone between white walls. And here was the solid intimate Doug.

[V]

FOR a week Ursula, Doug and Christine each guarded their secret. Christine's silent passion for Doug yet acknowledged him as remote and inaccessible—married. So far away had love carried her from the old cheap morality she had once shared with Gladys Willoughby. Besides, in Chris an urchin and a stoic dwelt together. . . . Supposing that Doug—who was *good* right through—else he was not Doug—should despise her for her bewitchment?

"He mustn't know, and neither must Ursula" . . . Ursula had been awfully decent on the whole.

"Perhaps I had better go home," Chris began to think, disconsolately.

Doug, just emerging from the illusion that Ursula's cure had worked splendidly, and that he had ceased to be susceptible to every wavelet of romance, was very careful indeed that Ursula should not guess how in Christine he had met the irresistible seventh wave which engulfs every strong man only once in a lifetime. He never meant that Chris should guess either,

but he was less careful with her than with Ursula, and was often led by the primitive but reverent state of his feelings into such semi-betrayals as: "Oh, God, if only——" and then square-jawed silence—when describing to his little love the picturesque corners of the globe into which his restless wanderings had taken him, and would take him again and again . . . each time the horizon pulled.

But with Ursula he behaved truculently. Till she longed for peace and solitude and the room, as a stale soul longs for adventure.

Ursula was fully awake to the girl's infatuation for a being of heroic stature who had for the moment become identified with Doug. She knew, too, that Chris believed it to be her own white-walled secret, and that she was pluckily determined neither herself nor Doug should guess it. Happiness enough to hug it close . . . ah, always and again, lucky Chris!

And Ursula knew that Doug believed his wife unsuspicuous of the Real Thing which had come into his life, and of his impending renunciation. She knew that unless suddenly and with a light word she pierced it through, Doug would keep up the stalwart pretence of being cured, more from vanity than from consideration for Ursula's broken heart—"he broke it often and cheerily enough over Doreen and Co!" Ursula's unspoken thrusts towards Doug were audacious and without pity . . . her eyes were naked of love, and only recently naked; a man stands least chance at such a time.

A week's hard rain and storm shut them up together, a trio of two deluded and one wise, in Grey Stone. Mr. Wenn discovered some technical flaw in the cess-pit, and digging it down again to its original depth, floated about on a raft in a six-foot square of water at the bottom, "like a St. Miniotish Peter Pan," Ursula said. If any of them passed down that part of the garden, and looked over the edge of the pit, Wenn's formidable list of the improvements he was effecting on the property, shouted up, threatened unmistakably that this was going to cost the Barrisons "good money." Doug could be with difficulty restrained from emptying buckets of dirty water into the cess-pit, in deliberate forgetfulness of Mr. Wenn's navigations therein.

"He'm nothin' but a gurt boy at heart," said Mrs. Endellion leniently. But Mrs. Endellion had to leave them, and her comfortable presence in the home had been replaced by Genesis Mitch, usually called Cissy. Cissy was a good girl, meek and slightly idiotic and fervently devoted to her master and mistress. She had no chin and humble devoted eyes. Louis Gregson, who during these dull and dripping days visited Grey Stone fairly often, named her "the Wordsworth child": "Wordsworth was meeting that type of child all over the place, wherever he went; it seems a pity he should be dead, and your Cissy wasted."

"A gentle child was Cissy Mitch,
The fourth of twenty-two,

Her mother's head, alas, was weak,
Her father wanting, too!" "

Ursula laughed. She had learnt "Lucy Grey" and "We are Seven" while at Miss Luther's.

"Parc Gooth had a visit from the Abbotts in their pony-cart, yesterday evening," Gregson remarked. "Delightful people. We played bridge, and then Miss Abbott accompanied my sister's Eye-talian in a few songs at the piano, while Abbott and I discussed harnesses and the resemblance between mediaeval witch-craft and modern Psychometry; and it was all so genial and harmonious that I could hardly believe some rumours I have heard at Mr. Wright's shop—"

"Embassy," Ursula corrected him.

"I beg his pardon—in Mr. Wright's Embassy, that there were once scenes of violence, stabbings and hard words, over the tenancy and rents of Parc Gooth."

"Ah, how sylvan and idyllic," he murmured affectedly, at the close of Ursula's description. "How shall I be able to tear myself away, next week, from this pastoral atmosphere?"

"You are returning to London next week?"

"Friday, yes."

"*Take me with you.*"

[VI]

LOUIS GREGSON, self-confessed as "an Authority upon the Unfair Sex," was always careful to behave in accordance with his own epigram: "Never be astonished at a woman, unless she says or does what you expect her to do!"

Nevertheless, Ursula's astounding request, dropped in her most gentle and matter-of-fact tones, did indeed tempt him to startled exclamation. For he certainly admired in Ursula the elusive beauty which took at least three meetings to declare itself to the senses. He perceived her, too, to be deep—perhaps he was right—and capable of swift and subtle audacities. In fact, his present state of mind, vulgarly expressed, was such that could hardly believe in its own luck. Nevertheless, taking his cue from her, he substituted mere polished gratification for his first rushed instinct to express himself in terms of raw ardour.

"Isn't he a detestable little cad," reflected Ursula, listlessly disdainful. She was not very much interested in him.

He was handy . . . and would not suffer by her whim, when its purpose was revealed.

It had so quickly unfurled itself in her secret mind, that it seemed to her now hardly any length of time had elapsed between the moment she realized she was free from loving Doug, to this final irrevo-

cability of "Take me with you" when Louis announced his return to London.

Doug and Christine loved each other. And she, Ursula, was the unwanted third. So again she would make lonely sacrifice. She would run away and leave them to be happy: "But of course he must marry her. And while I'm alive, I'm in the way. I don't intend to drown myself—I'm not nearly miserable enough." The only alternative was to give Doug ostensible cause to divorce her. Her reputation must complete the sacrifice. Well—she would do that . . . gladly. "It needn't, it *shan't* go beyond—just my reputation." Ursula's cheeks, though she was alone while thinking all this out, flamed a vivid scarlet. She could herself be gallant squire in cool defence of Ursula . . . her old childish dreams in the room at the Laburnums, brought to action at last.

Louis Gregson, it was evident, must be the dummy lover in the classic situation she was evolving with such unclassic differences in her personal point of view. She could manage Louis Gregson. He was commonplace. The obvious man in the case. Nothing need be damaged except his amour propre. And Doug, given the appearance of Ursula's guilt—all evidence supplied by Ursula—would instruct his solicitors to file a petition; and she would not defend.

All this was unimportant and rather lumbering mechanism. It was a pity that the law made it neces-

sary. The reality was the romance of Doug and Christine; pearl in the clumsy oyster.

"If I don't love Doug myself, I've no right to lie about and spoil things." Ursula, sure of this, was able serenely to go on with her plans.

Convention again reminded her that when she slipped away and effaced herself, Doug and Christine must not be left unchaperoned at Grey Stone. She could trust Doug to be chivalrous; she could trust Christine to be loyal to chastity. But it was Ursula's responsibility, impetuously undertaken, to arrange for them a future of clear happiness with no gossip to smudge it. Besides—Christine was the guest in her charge. A whimsical notion occurred to Ursula, solving the problem; and she wrote a charming note to Aunt Lavvy, at the Laburnums, inviting her to Grey Stone for a month's holiday—"Would next Friday suit you?"

Aunt Lavvy would be the ideal chaperone for a young girl. Undoubtedly, too, Doug must adore the little porcelain lady; and she in her turn would be entirely captivated by the big, boyish, sunny-hearted Doug. Ursula smiled, imagining the harmonious trio . . . the smile twisted into mockery, as she recited to herself Aunt Lavvy's outburst of sweet and silvery indignation on discovery that Ursula could have wantonly deserted *such* a man; "But then Ursula always was queer and headstrong, under her quiet ways!" And very, very tactfully she would con-

sole Doug's perplexity; or, if he roughly blamed himself, argue with him; at last, guide him to see that the catastrophe was no catastrophe at all, but a blessing in disguise: "The false princess has slipped out of your life, Boy" (Yes, she would call him Boy) "but the real little princess is not so far away . . . is she? In a year or two perhaps you will be able to fit her with the glass slipper."

Ursula could hear Aunt Lavvy tinkling out some such speech; her voice lifted to a second's arch railery as she spoke of the "real little princess," and then her plump hand resting lightly for a moment on Doug's bowed head: "You know, Boy, I may be old-fashioned, but I am not so narrow-minded as to think that one mistake should spoil your whole life——"

"Oh well, she always hated me!" thought Ursula, stamping her letter, and with a shrug dismissing the envisioned scene of a week hence. Anyhow, she would be gone. The night train from Gullick, by which she and Louis had planned to travel, left Gullick at seven-twenty-three p. m., exactly ten minutes before the arrival of the express from London, with Aunt Lavvy.

"Let me see, Doug will give up our room to Aunt Lavvy, of course, and sleep in his cabin berth. Christine needn't move out of the sea-room."

And once again she paused, before dropping the letter into the box: "She understands things . . . clever little Aunt Lavvy. She can't fail to wonder, afterwards, why I invited her—at such a selfish crisis

of my life. Oh *damn*—she'll guess more than other people. She always did. That time over Hal and the room. *Let her wonder and guess!*" The letter was viciously hurled through the slit. "She'll come, in the first place, because she's curious. And she'll stay because she's comfortable and because I'm in black disgrace, which is bound to be soothing; and because poor Doug is my victim, and he and Chris are a pair of babes in worldly matters—and mainly because the situation is dramatic and needs delicate handling. Her gifts don't get much chance to be used with only mother and father and Lottie and William at home now."

Aunt Lavvy accepted the invitation, saying gracefully that she was looking forward to a better acquaintance with her nephew-in-law, whom she had only very occasionally met at the Laburnums dinner-table.

Ursula did not inform Doug of the impending arrival. He would naturally ask: "Where are we to put her?" and she was not prepared to answer: "I'm making room for her by running away with Louis Gregson on the same day." Aunt Lavvy's opportune arrival, in the midst of chaos and bewilderment, should be a miracle to Doug—until she explained Ursula's invitation. And even then, he would never be able to account for it.

"This is all—*fun!*" thought Ursula, exultant at the way the figures and dates in her plan slipped neatly into shape, without objection or hitch. Fun, too, that

she was doing it all alone; that whereas Louis knew of her flight from Doug, and Aunt Lavvy knew she was expected at Grey Stone on the following Friday, and Doug knew that his love for Christine was the love of his life, yet these were only shreds and particles of the sumptuous whole, Ursula's whole, containing all secrets and all knowledge. It was she who was welding them together, with added touches of her own sprite's mischief; rounding it off, remembering here and there a flaw to be adjusted. . . . Proud; for she was not doing wrong. To efface herself so that Doug and Christine should be happy together. Ah, surely that was sacrifice; and it would not count against her, in that she had worked her scheme skilfully, with a laugh of renunciation instead of the eternal tears.

She took no pains over the arrangement of her end of the escapade. Her own future, once disentangled from Doug and Christine, she trusted to hazard or inspiration. On only one point she set her teeth and pressed her lips sternly together: that Louis would—have—to—be—managed.

[VII]

THURSDAY evening, Ursula was in the kitchen with Cissy—explaining patiently for perhaps the fortieth time that cold water poured directly into a saucepan which had held milk will clean it better than hot. She felt a little bit unreal as she did so. Christine swung her legs indolently from

the kitchen table, and listened to the lecture. A strong gale was buffeting the house.

Suddenly an urgent rapping shook the door. Mr. Wright hurled it open and staggered into the lamp-light, with the bread-basket. The wind and rain leapt in after him. He turned and fought the door, closing it after a grim struggle.

“Good evening, Mrs. Barrison.” He was rather breathless, and spoke in the voice of one amazed at his own calm.

Ursula was mildly surprised. This was more or less the wonted time for their loaves to arrive, but Mr. Wright usually sent the boy, and did not bring them himself.

“Thank you,” she said. “It’s a wild evening, isn’t it?”

“There’ll be wilder evenings before we’ve done with the year. I don’t want to alarm you, Mrs. Barrison, but there’s rumours of negotiations broken down, and the railway strike starting at midnight. In fact, I’ve had news through”—he stopped abruptly, recollecting prudence. “So I thought I’d better take the bread round myself tonight,” he finished.

“But why?” inquired Chris, pertly. “It isn’t the French Revolution, is it?”

“That’s not a word I’d throw about lightly just now, Miss Powys,” replied Mr. Wright, respectfully—but his hand went to his coat pocket with a gesture grimly significant. “Well—if there’s trouble, I’m ready for them. I’ve got my sixshooter handy. Not that

I'm one to lose my head. I don't expect any real rioting in a place like this till supplies begin to be cut off. And then my shop'll be the first. . . . I must go on." He buttoned himself up, pulled forward his hat, and by mere suggestion achieved a muffled effect. "Good night, Mrs. Barrison. You'll let me know if there's anything I can do for you."

"Will you yourself bring the bread tomorrow evening too?" asked Chris, joyously, determining that Doug should not fail to be present.

"*God willing!*" Mr. Wright was silhouetted for a brief moment against the stormy and perilous blackness beyond the open door, and then went forth—distinctly went "forth" and not merely "out." Quick retreating footsteps . . . and he and his bread basket were seen no more that night.

In silence, Ursula continued to scour the saucepan she held.

"Is it true, or d'you think he made it all up?" demanded Christine, still flushed with the effort not to laugh in the very face of Mr. Wright's histrionics.

"It may quite well be true that the negotiations have broken down at the eleventh hour. Haven't you read the papers lately?"

Christine shook her head. "The papers" were many million miles removed from her sea-room and enchantment.

"They expected it all to be settled quite happily by now, so I didn't bother, but . . ."

"Then we'll none of us be able to travel after midnight, will we?"

"Not for two or three weeks, or however long the strike lasts."

"Oh well," Chris exclaimed philosophically, springing from her perch on the table, "we none of us want to, so it doesn't much matter!" And now she could not possibly go home, however conscience might prompt it. No trains from Gullick! Perfection enclosed Grey Stone and snapped around it indivisibly like a bracelet. Christine began to sing. At the same moment, Cissy Mitch started feebly to cry.

Ursula lost her temper . . . the saucepan clattered on to the red flagstones, and the kitchen door banged and reverberated behind her. Christine's fresh pipings were not to be endured!

"No wonder she's in a rage with you," Chris remarked blithely to Cissy Mitch. "What on earth are you crying about?"

"Eh, miss, but tes dreadful, about they trains," sobbed Cissy.

"But, my dear kid, have you ever wanted to go as far as Gullick in your life? No? Well—have you even been to the next village, then? to Polpinnock?"

Cissy, piteously damp, confessed that she had been once as far as Polpinnock Cove, in a school treat. It was a great event to her. But, in spite of Christine's laughing expostulations, she continued to shed tears over the breakdown of England's railway system.

Perhaps the manner of Mr. Wright's entrance and exit had shaken her nerves.

"It must all wait," Ursula said to herself, when she had recaptured control over her disappointment. After all, if she and Louis could not go, neither could Aunt Lavvy come.

The next morning, on her way back from the village, whither she had been in a vain attempt to obtain certain news of the strike, Ursula was met by Christine racing along the grassy track from Grey Stone.

"I say, what do you think? A perfectly darling old lady has arrived. She says you invited her. She came by the night train instead of waiting till today, in case the strike started before it was expected. Old Wright was twenty-four hours wrong in his news—it's tonight, not yesterday night, that the last trump sounds and all the engine-drivers throw down their spanners or whatever it is they use. I say, Ursula, why didn't you tell us you'd ask her? Did you mean it for a surprise? I simply worship her already. She's not really your aunt, is she? And where is she going to sleep?"

Doug, when he returned from the farm, for lunch, promptly settled the final question: "Lucky I had that bunk fixed up in my cabin, isn't it, Teddy? Only a glorified shelf on hinges, of course, but I can doss there perfectly well. . . . Oh, that's all right, Aunt Lavvy—may I call you that? Good! That's all right, I'm an old campaigner. And then you and

Teddy can share, and Chris can stop in the little end room. It's rather too cramped, isn't it, Teddy, for any one but an infant?" ("And I like to think of you in that room, Chris . . ." he told her afterwards.)

Ursula's fleet resolve was to carry out her plan now, strike or no strike. She and Louis must make a dash for it. Perhaps some volunteer trains would be run.

At all events, she could not remain at Grey Stone, sharing quarters with Aunt Lavvy. Aunt Lavvy, Chris and Doug, and herself—what an incongruous house-party in Arcadia! With emotions and purposes as fierce, as overlapping and as secret as they had once been in the tightly packed Laburnums. And the railway strike ringing them in without means of escape.

"And *I* invited Christine, and *I* invited Aunt Lavvy. What makes me do these goblin things? I don't care, I must see Louis and tell him. I'll chance it. Let him think I'm desperate for love of him."

Aunt Lavvy had hardly changed in looks during the past nine years. Her skin was still the colour and texture of apple-blossom; her snowy hair as beautifully arranged; her dainty uncrumpled appearance made it seem impossible that she had been travelling all night. When she smiled at Christine across the luncheon-table, the young girl felt a sudden lump in her throat; felt that she wanted to be good; and also that she was going to pour out everything—yes,

about Doug and everything, to this adorable little old lady, the instant they were alone.

And when she smiled at Doug, he wanted to protect her from some danger; and also to tell her what a rotter he'd been. He saw that she had taken quite a special fancy to him; and he rejoiced that Teddy should have invited her to Grey Stone.

And when she smiled at Ursula, Ursula knew she had to get away before night.

"Will the other two think me a bore, Ursula dear, if I unload a little family gossip? To begin with, William really has been taken into the business, starting—well, from as near the bottom as the proprietor's son can ever genuinely start. Your father is delighted with him. He's a sound little fellow, our William. I think he'll be Lord Mayor one day, don't you, Ursula? And the harder he works, the stouter he seems to grow. Your father says sometimes that it's queer to have only his youngest son to succeed him in the firm; but Bunny. . . . Ah, Bunny! I comfort myself by thinking that he's the rolling stone who will gather the most moss in the end, even if it's moss of the kind invisible to ordinary people. He was in New Zealand when we last heard. And Hal preferred 'Varsity and law. And now that his first love, Maisie, is engaged to somebody else—didn't you hear about it, Ursula? I expect poor old Hal feels a little too sore about it to write. But he's not quite so stricken as he thinks he is. He's handsomer than ever, too, and doing wonderfully well; I must say we

were all surprised that Maisie preferred her father's young locum. However—one person is mightily relieved that his dream has been puffed away, and that's Nina. It means so much to her, keeping home for Hal. Have you got any idolized big brothers, Christine? No? Then you wouldn't quite understand how Nina feels about Hal. Lottie is still a little kind trotting thing, contented to be useful at home. But Nina, never. And Ursula, of course, was the family beauty and bound to be captured early.” Aunt Lavvy directed a saucy dimple at Doug, who replied boyishly:

“Oh, if it were just a question of looks, Aunt Lavvy, what about you?”

“*What* about me?” she flirted with him.

“I love powdered hair!” was his quickly gallant response.

“You—sailor!” laughed Aunt Lavvy, fatally.

Doug was a sailor for the rest of that meal.

After lunch, Miss Gregson and Louis walked into the house. “My sister has brought me to say good-bye,” he said, after they had duly been introduced to Aunt Lavvy. “Or rather, to ask your combined advice as to whether I should make my dash for liberty tonight.”

And Ursula, alert for signals, grasped that he was coolly going to discuss plans, and grope for hers, in front of the others; indeed, he had no option but to do so. She waited, amused, for her cue to enlighten him.

Miss Gregson said, "I told him he'd do much better to wait until we had certain news about the strike, and Umberto agrees with me——"

("That's the Eye-talian," murmured Louis to Ursula.)

Doug gave his opinion that a journey to London, under the circumstances, would be no end of a rag.

"They might even let me drive the engine," Louis agreed heartily. He just glanced at Ursula then, with the air of a man who can bide his time, and who can trust an intelligent woman to annex this same bidding as special tribute to her wits, and not as detrimental to her charm.

"Have you ordered Champion's car to drive you into Gullick?" Ursula inquired. "I wonder——" she paused, doubtfully knitting her brows. Then: "What do you think, Doug? Shall I go in, too, if Mr. Gregson will give me a lift, and bring out some stores? We've two extra in the house now, you know, and the strike may mean a tightness of provisions, if we rely entirely on our Mr. Wright."

"I wouldn't fuss," said Doug, "we can always raid the shop."

"He has his six-shooter handy," Christine reminded him, half seriously.

"He has also special and private information about the probable strike," Louis pattered on in his glib fashion. "So has the post office. So have the coastguards. The coastguards are apparently crystal-gazers in their spare time, for they are always cred-

ited, in a place like this, with mysterious advance knowledge. Some say the strike has started, some that it will start at sundown, or at midnight, or on Thursday week, or not at all. My business can't wait until the day-before-yesterday's papers come in the day-after-tomorrow. It's no good clinging round my knees and sobbing, Sister Ann, because I have made up my mind" . . . he had done so directly Ursula answered his unspoken "Will you risk it?" by her suggestion of driving into Gullick with him, to bring out stores.

Miss Gregson snapped: "I've no intention of clinging round your knees, thanks. You've been here a goodish time, my lad, and Umberto and I are tired of you."

"Mr. Gregson must come to Grey Stone for true hospitality," purred Aunt Lavvy. "Here, they welcome an old lady without even minding or noticing that she had arrived without any luggage! And yet"—playfully—"luggage is supposed to be a certificate of respectability, isn't it?"

A chorus of contrition broke from Doug, Christine and Ursula.

"By Jove, nor you had! I *am* an unobservant beast!"

"I was quite sure, somehow, that it had gone up to your room. I was going to ask you if I might help you unpack."

"Where did you leave it, Aunt Lavvy?"

"At Gullick Station, till called for. Don't look

so worried, my dear children; of course I couldn't expect a car to meet me, when I arrive twelve hours before I am expected. I was just wondering how I should cover the ten miles to St. Miniot, when a charming old gentleman with white hair—a General, I think he said, but I have his card—sent me a message by the porter——”

The episode of old-world courtesy to a gentle-woman in distress, acquired, in the telling, that typical Watteau atmosphere which seemed conveniently to attend Aunt Lavvy wherever she went. Even the Gullick porter was translated. Briefly, the General had offered her a lift out in his own car; but his wife's luggage was so voluminous that Aunt Lavvy's trunk could not be squeezed in—“And so I wondered, Ursula darling, if you were driving out to Gullick anyhow this evening, for stores, would you mind calling at the station and bringing it back with you? But not if——”

“Of course Teddy will!” Doug promised, settling the matter. “Quite a good notion of yours about stores, Teddy. Don't forget a few tins of tunah-fish. I like it. They called it tunny-fish once, but during the war and the food shortage it went up in social tone. Tunah-fish!”

“Tunah-fish!” echoed Chris, haughtily.

“We'll all rattle in with you to Gullick, if you like?” Doug suggested further to Louis, who, without a flicker of an eyelid, murmured that he would be honoured by their united company.

"Bounder!" thought Doug, for the fifteenth time.

"With you and your luggage to go in, Louis, and Mrs. Garrison, and Champion driving, and a fresh lot of luggage and Mrs. Garrison and stores to go back, I should think you'd be as full as you can manage," Miss Gregson said.

Louis was aware that this argument was so obvious that he could safely acquiesce in Doug's proposal, and leave somebody else to point it out.

"Will there at least be room for my empty suitcase, going out?" Ursula asked of Louis.

"To bring it home full of tunah-fish? Oh, yes, I think it can be managed. And if no trains run up to town tonight?" Dangerously he aimed his last question full at her; and dangerously she answered him: "Oh—chance it!"

Louis got up to go. He said he would call for her. He said he must pack. He said that he had been delighted to meet Aunt Lavvy. He did not say that knowing now all he wanted to know, there was no further reason to prolong the visit.

[VIII]

THE room was on the first floor back of the second-best hotel in Gullick. The low green hills beyond the window, by day strangely biblical in their quiet outline, were by now a still simpler affair of uvs and downs scrawled black on a wash of dim sky. The blind ws drawn and the short muslin

curtains, and a still further muffler of red stiff curtains. Ursula sat primly on the edge of an upright wooden chair, and waited for Louis to come in. He had gone, after dinner in the coffee-room, to make a last inquiry about a train to London that night; to London, or even as far as Exeter or Plymouth. But she knew already that the inquiry would be futile. The stationmaster had been most discouraging when they had confidently driven up in time for the seven-twenty-three. "We've had our orders from the Trades Union. Trains stopped at noon today. By tomorrow, though, I dare say Government'll be runnin' some," he added gloomily.

Then Ursula had ordered Aunt Lavvy's trunk to be lifted on to Champion's car, and had told him to drive it back to Grey Stone: "I shall take the last bus out," she said. "The nine-ten. But I don't want my aunt to wait for her things."

Doug and Christine and Aunt Lavvy had accepted an invitation from Miss Gregson, on parting that afternoon, to dine with her at Parc Gooth: "And will you join them, Mrs. Garrison, when you get back from Gullick?"

"Thanks very much. I certainly will, when I get back from Gullick . . . if I'm not too tired."

Now—she was waiting for Louis. He would enter presently, expectant and debonair—"knowing his part backwards," and Ursula's mouth curved gaily as she reflected that for once a surprise was in store for Lothario.

The setting, too, was somewhat less tropical and exotic than he must be accustomed to, under similar circumstances, along the lines of red roses, gleaming mirrors and silk eiderdowns. The second-best hotel at Gullick did not cater for luxurious clients. Over the hard double bed the white counterpane was like a winding-sheet. The chest of drawers, with its small mirror on top, was mahogany, and so was the washstand. In the basin stood a can of hot water. One armchair was placed on a small yellowish hair rug in front of the fireplace, hidden by a painted glass screen; a shelf supported a few books lopping sideways in a dejected fashion. On the nondescript wall hung some prints of what might have been the Vatican and the Coliseum, if any one were sufficiently interested to inspect them. Ursula was in a vivid dancing mood; the small fidgety discomforts and disappointments of the evening, which might have daunted any girl in a lovelorn condition, only excited her spirit yet more. Her cheeks were scarlet, and her long-shaped lazy grey eyes shone with dark fires under her straight brows. She surveyed herself in the foggy glass, between two tall candle-flames. Her clothes were staid and un conspicuous as usual: a navy blue coat and skirt; a white silk shirt, open at the throat; a pliable grey suède hat of the Whittington shape.

“Poor Louis!” Again she re-seated herself on the stiff chair, and folded her gloved hands in front of her; her feet, in small grey suède shoes, rested on

her suit-case, with toes slightly turning in. She lowered her eyelids—"I'm glad he's common and glib and bold; the sort of dapper little whelp who has made women suffer, and rather boasts of it. . . ."

Louis came in.

"No chance of a train. We must stay here." He cast round a comical look of distaste. Then, thrillingly: "*Ursula . . .*"

She did not stir. Only her cheeks' scarlet faded and faded till she was white as milk. Louis was disconcerted. After all, a man does not expect shyness after a woman has taken all the initiative, thrown herself at his head, one might say, in an ungallant translation of her behaviour.

"I gave our names, downstairs, as Mr. and Mrs. Lewis. Please, will that do?" Her "please" was meekness itself.

"Oh yes, as well as anything"—impatiently. Had she not recognized that the tiresome preliminaries and the mechanism were all over now, and that he had begun the emotional love-scene?

"Let me take off your things and make you comfortable," Louis suggested, and laid a seductive hand on her coat, giving it a gentle pull. But her whole frame resisted. "Or shall I unpack your suit-case?" Her feet pressed downwards. "I have never seen your hair down yet, Ursula; your beautiful honey-gold hair. . . ."

"Please, I would rather keep on my things"—in the same unaccountably meek voice which reminded

Louis of cold moonlight, school-teachers, and luke-warm sago pudding—all good, and all by him abominated.

"For how long?" mocking eyebrows raised.

"Till—till I'm acclimatized, please."

Louis laughed uneasily. "And how do you suggest we should while away the time, until you're—acclimatized, please?"

"There are some books on that shelf. If you read to me, I could crochet, couldn't I?" And with an air of innocent glee, she pulled out her work from her handbag.

Louis slowly crossed the room to the bookshelf. . . . He could not be happy until he had ousted her from her lordship of the slippery situation, treating it and him in a spirit of dainty buffoonery; and for the moment, he, usually so nimble and astute at solving the woman riddle, was utterly bewildered by this elusive crescent-moon of a girl, slender and pale and swathed in flying clouds of mystery.

Of course a woman *ought* to be mysterious. It was part of her appeal, her stock-in-trade. Louis had no objection to the conventional Mystery of Woman. He had written sophisticated articles about it. But this Ursula Barrison——

He decided not to force the situation, but to give it time.

"Here is a treatise on physical geography, a psalm-book, 'Home Influence,' 'Happy Thoughts from Day to Day,' 'Pigs, the Care and Feeding of,' and 'Little

Ellen's Dream,' " he read, from the backs of the volumes on the shelf. "Which will interest you most?" And he began to read aloud, with very precise utterance, a passage from "Little Ellen's Dream."

"Kind little Ellen could not bear to see the snow, because she had two pairs of shoes, and perhaps some poor little girl had none. 'Mama darling,' she cried, 'if I am good, may I take my shoes as a present to Nelly Carter, and also some eggs and my nicest hoop? I dreamt that it was her birthday today and she cried because she had no presents.' 'Do, my darling,' said Ellen's mother——"

Suddenly Ursula buried her head on to her folded arms and began to shake with sobs.

Louis, interrupted in his efforts to entertain her, watched her for a few moments. Then he said, "You're laughing!"

And she raised a flushed face, its composure broken up into radiant quivering mirth.

"It was your puzzled gloom—and that book—"Kind little Ellen". . . and us here in this absurd room. . . . The way you said '*Ursula*' when you came in. No, I'm not in the very least hysterical. . . . I'm just amused. . . . If you would only stop expecting me to fall into your arms, you might be amused too."

"I think it unlikely," said Louis. And Ursula, seeing a certain male look, hot and bulging, in his eyes, stopped laughing. She realized that now

would come the strain on her boast that Louis must be managed.

"I know," she said, and her voice was rather breathless. "I know I asked you to take me with you, and you thought I meant it—passionately. And when the strike was declared I still insisted. And I took this room, calling ourselves Mr. and Mrs. Lewis. And now I'm here alone with you, and of course you expect—need I be coarse, Louis? I've been fencing up until this moment. Now I've got to be frank. I don't love you; not passionately nor tenderly. I don't even like you. I've been using you, that's all. One is more likely to choose a person for use, whom one doesn't even like . . . rather despises—but anyway, you were the only man handy; and the only man vain enough to believe that woman throws away her all for sweet passion's sake. You knew so much about women, you see."

"Yes. And you know nothing about men. For instance, I'm not going to spend the night in conversation, however interesting. . . If it were not so melodramatic as to arouse your sense of humour again, my dear Ursula, I should say that you were in my power."

She sighed. "I was silly to mock at you and make you more angry. Now I suppose we shall have to struggle and dodge about, and the chairs will get disordered, and my hair will come down—and there will

be a great bruise on my wrist, just *here*, where you finally grip it——”

“And then?” demanded Louis. He was watching her intently, but the hot bulging look was gone from his eyes.

“I shan’t give in,” she whispered. “But—must we? Must I get the table between me and you, or threaten to hurl myself from the window? I don’t even hate you. I don’t love another man. I haven’t lost my head. It’s nothing of that sort, nothing so stark and simple. I wanted—oh well, it’s no good telling you what I wanted, it would take too long, and you’re anxious to start being mannish.” And mischief still sparkled through her resignation to the inevitable conflict.

Louis, surprisingly, said he would like to hear what she wanted.

“Well——” She paused. The exquisite shape of her pale gold head was motionless as an oval plaque between the two candle-spears on the tall bureau behind her. “Well—can you imagine the miracle—of running away with oneself—cut off all round as though with a sharp clean knife? After one has been clogged and clogged with people. *Men?* . . . And I’m in love with loneliness.”

Suddenly she flung her hands above her head, the palms upturned and curved as though for water from heaven. . . . Then slowly sank them again, remembering that the reason she had left her husband

was that he loved another girl, and that she desired them to be happy together.

"Forget if I've said anything crazy. Quite frankly and simply, Louis, I've left Doug because he's in love with Christine—the thin, brown-eyed child staying with us at Grey Stone. And she's in love with him. It's quite a romance, isn't it?"

"Quite," Louis assented gravely.

"So you see now where you—where you—I mean, if I made the sacrifice, it had to be done completely. I had to make it easy for him to divorce and marry her. You see—she's Doug's happiness."

"May I ask, quite without prejudice, if she, the thin, brown-eyed child, is Doug's *first* happiness—since he married you?"

Ursula flushed. "About the twenty-first; the heart of Doug has many splinters." And though she laughed at the confession, her eyelids, like Mona Lisa's, were a little weary. . . .

She returned, with a touch of craftsman's pride, to relation of her detailed scheme: "I invited Aunt Lavvy, so that she could be in the house when it all happened. That was a good idea, wasn't it?"

"The charming little Dresden lady with the coo in her voice? You hate her, don't you, Ursula? Why did you wilfully select as chaperon, Aunt-Lavvy-whom-you-hate?"

Ursula's glance at him was now frankly admiring. He had wonderful perception, this—carpet-walker! "Why? Because somehow I enjoy building up a—

bitterly comic state of affairs. And Aunt Lavvy and I . . . and the room . . ." She hesitated.

"Sit down," said Louis. "We have at least seven hours still to get through, in what is, for me in particular, another bitterly comic state of affairs. So, in the truly Russian-novel style, you shall tell me the whole story of Aunt Lavvy—and you—and the room."

Ursula did not read Russian novels. But it seemed oddly natural that to Louis, of all people, she should be able to talk more naturally than ever before to any one else. . . .

. . . . "And yet people go on living with other people as though it weren't the most important thing in the world," said Ursula, by way of conclusion, epilogue, envoi and moral to her tale. "Aunt Lavvy, and our whole family, and Gums, and Stanley Watson, and the servants . . . not selected to live together for any *reason*, but because it's happened like that. It must be the same in millions of houses. Somebody always in a state of bruise through knocking up against somebody else, till we settle down to bruises, and get numb to them, and call the result 'home' or 'family life,' whichever you please. Do you know that some boarding-houses advertise 'family life' . . . with about thirty haphazard strangers. And nobody sees it's funny. You choose your clothes with care and your career with care, but misfit houses are chosen any-

how, and rooms and meals are shared anyhow. . . .”

“Sometimes there’s a crisis—and combustion,” suggested Louis. And Ursula took him up jubilantly.

“Yes, sometimes there’s a crisis. Over the last crisis, I lost the room and myself. This time——” she was about to say “this time I regain them both”; but once more she recalled what was undoubtedly a fact, that she was effacing herself so that Doug and Christine might be happy. “And”—her voice shook slightly over the amended version of her behaviour—“this time I’m going to run away, and so give Christine a present of her romance. It’s only decent, isn’t it? You’d say so?”

“I should say,” Louis replied after due deliberation, “that it was the most selfish action you had ever done or are ever likely to do.”

Then he burst into scoffing laughter: “Tit for tat over your laugh at me, my lady humbug! Oh, the pathetic quiver on your lips, your meek eyelids, and your voice cadging for my approbation. *Sacrifice!* Ursula Barrison, what do you want to do most in all the world? Why, to run away, run away, run away. You’re thrilled by the idea of escape. In love with loneliness—you told me so yourself. Your whole being lightens and is swift to it. . . . *Sacrifice?* ‘What’s become of Waring, since he gave us all the slip? Chose land-travel, or sea-faring!’ Own up, Ursula.”

Furious with him at first, she listened—snapped and yielded.

“Oh, I’ll own up. It’s true. It’s all true. What—who is Waring?”

“An invention of Browning’s, I suppose. It doesn’t matter much. He got fed up with the streets he knew and the friends he knew, and suddenly disappeared. They were left wondering—and talking about it. Years later, one of them, sailing on the Adriatic, caught a quick glimpse of him in a little boat, with a boy who sold wine and fruit—

“ . . . Then the boat,
I know not how, turned sharply round,
Laying her whole side on the sea
As a leaping fish does; from the lee
Into the weather, cut somehow
Her sparkling path beneath our bow;
And so went off, as with a bound
Into the rose and golden half
Of the sky. . . . So I saw the last of Waring!”

“Well, Waring of St. Miniot, what are you going to do?”

“*Give them all the slip . . .*” leapt, tingling, from Ursula. “Why do you call me selfish, Louis? Chris and Doug are complete without me—and even if I’m not making a very big sacrifice by dropping out. . . . My good name is something: This room and you, and leaving Doug to believe . . . and divorce me. I detest squalor, and it is all squalid and not very pretty: like squeezing through a dark,

stale-smelling alley. But then there's an archway. And beyond——” Her eyes were filled with the promise of sea and shining space, like the windows of the room, Christine's room.

“‘What's become of Waring?’ ” she murmured, fascinated. . . .

“And you really think you are justified——” Louis began.

“Oh, but need everybody do something pompous and heavy like justifying their existence, or accepting a responsibility, or—or carrying an unsmirched reputation? Can't just one here and there—me, for instance—run along lightly, as though I left no footprint? As though I didn't count? It's so tiring to count. And to be sure of seeing the same people every day, and the same set of habits . . . the same old standards . . . same old places. You stick on because you love some one, or because of health, or because you lack courage. And words like outlaw and pirate and solitude are not for you . . . not for you . . . you try not to hear them. But I don't love any one now, thank God! and I'm strong as the wind, and not afraid of anything except to be crowded.”

“Claustrophobia . . .” murmured the up-to-date Louis. She had never heard the word: “Oh, I won't pretend any more that it's a sacrifice for me to run away; it isn't; it's escape—and not very clever of you to have discovered that! But as it happens, I can be generous to the girl in the room, and yet in the same breath win back the room for myself. I

must apologize for dragging you in as a dummy, Louis," with a whimsical drop from exultation; "but I must at least pretend to elope in more tangible and more sinister company than just my own. They haven't enough imagination in the Divorce Courts to accept me as the co-respondent as well as the defendant."

"You can hardly expect it of them, my dear." In an absent fashion the man paced the room. He had forgotten his own claims and injury; intent on this would-be Undine, who was defying the very existence of her human soul. . . .

"You talk of being generous to the girl in the room," he broke out, abruptly. "What about your husband? Is he worth your gift?"

"No," frankly. "That's why I left him out. Doug—oh, he's noisy and cheap romantic, and jumps over tea-tables; that's not the harm in him. But he can't be faithful. And that goes as deep as *he* goes. And so he grabs your lonely dreams—and gives back nothing."

"And so you grab the girl's lonely dreams, and give her—Doug. You, who have tried him, and found out what he does. You can't coolly abandon your own mistake without working it out to the end."

"Don't—be quiet—I won't hear. . . ." Ursula's clenched hands were pushed out as though in fight against his argument; but her eyes, scared and very light round the dilated pupils, were as though suddenly woken from a spell. "I'm going," she

muttered; but he caught her by the wrists and continued ruthlessly:

"In a few years hence, Christine will go through all the torture you've been through. Leave her the room with the white walls—and she'll be luxuriantly and youthfully sorrowful over her lost hero—and forget him. You can't safeguard the girl any other way than by remaining Doug's wife yourself."

"Why should I safeguard her?" cried Ursula.

"Why should you have preserved Hal from damage, nine years ago? You had to, that's all."

She pleaded with him now: "I can't go back to it, Louis, I can't. Aunt Lavvy's there, at Grey Stone, in the house, in my bed. And Doug . . . I purposely left him easy clues to pick up my elopement, so that he'd have no trouble in getting rid of me. That's the ridiculous part of it. If I went back—tomorrow—I'd have to let him suppose that when it came to it, I had cared too much for him and too little for you—I should have to be repentant and ask him to be magnanimous and forgive me. And he would. After a fierce struggle. All the rest of my life I'd have to live with Doug and be forgiven. And never be able to laugh out loud. And never to tell him how funny it was. . . ."

After a pause: "Of course I'm not going back," Ursula decided in perfectly normal and decided tones.

As though Louis' silence had been a powerful attack, she met it with the fleet retort: "I was able

to give up the room years ago, because then I believed that life would somehow be gleaming and lit up afterwards, as a sort of reward. Transfigured. But I know now, I *know* it's just the same, only beastlier. Virtue isn't its own reward, even spiritually. How can I go back knowing that? You wouldn't ask it, Louis?"

"Yes. From you. That would be a delightfully cosy pink-wadding to the spirit, wouldn't it, to be sure of abstract heaven after sacrifice?"

"If I went through it, Christine can."

"There was no one then who had proved Doug, and could warn you."

"I want the room again—or room again—as much as she does. A thousand times more."

"So you'd take it at the expense of hers? Pirate?—you're worse; you're a robber."

"My creed is to fling off our mistakes and start again. It's tameness to abide by them."

"Your creed doesn't count while you're concerned with Christine, and her—symbolically—white walls."

"I'm *not* concerned with them?" in a final passion of revolt. "It's not my responsibility."

"Yes, it is." And he added grimly: "God shares responsibility with those who are privileged to see what they're about."

Ursula began softly to cry.

And Louis, aware that the tussle was over, mercifully turned his back on her, and gazed out:

of the window. . . . His mouth was puckered to a grimace, and his sloe-eyes were unspeakably tender. "We must look grotesquely like an Academy picture called 'Renunciation,'" was one of the irrelevant thoughts which drifted through his mind, dismally empty of any consolation for himself—or her. "One of those silly problem pictures to make the public wonder which of the two is renouncing and which isn't. . . ." Then Ursula's voice startled him:

"Come and talk it over!" Ursula's voice, clear and merry. "You, of all people, are a queer Figure of Light to have been sent to guide me through my darkness, aren't you, Louis?"

"You needn't advertise it," laughed Louis; but he could more readily have kissed her feet in admiration for the gallant pull-up; her little gold head jauntily tilted towards defeat, instead of bowed down under it. "I prefer my Mephistophelian reputation, thanks. I may be a prig tonight, but I don't intend to make a habit of it, Ursula Barrison."

"Your next victim will find you doubly the Evil One, in fact," she surmised lazily. "And labelled 'dangerous' from head to foot."

Louis' reply was an unexpectedly savage kick at Doug. "It's not the man labelled 'dangerous' of whom women need beware; if he is easy with his kisses and his innuendoes, they all recognize him. . . . But your strong romantic figure with a boy's heart, and speech nobly bitten back, and a great

love silently endured—one great love after another— Oh, Lord, he makes me *groan!* And the harm he does is deadly—every time."

"Is it possible that you mean my husband?" Ursula mocked. "It needn't be deadly for Christine. . . . I can prophesy a charming idyll for Christine, and quite plausible. Would you like to hear it? Aunt Lavvy has taken a fancy to her, you see. And after we have all enjoyed a happy month together at Grey Stone, Christine will be invited down to the Laburnums for Christmas, because the poor brave child needs to be petted and cheered—'Haven't you noticed, Ursula, that she's moping?' Oh yes, my Aunt Lavvy is quite observant. And at the Laburnums for Christmas will be my handsome brother Hal."

"Your other rescue? It *is* an idyll! And they both live happy ever after. They'll never be grateful to you, Ursula, but *I* am . . . for them. You—you young captain!"

[IX]

CHRISTINE sat huddled on the window-seat of the room, her lashes and mouth curled softly upwards to the round rusty disc of the October full moon. In that wistful attitude, and wearing loose white cotton pyjamas that sagged from her slim body, she looked more like Pierrot than ever. The moonlight touched the sea, and her throat, and burnished the top of her round dark head. She had said

good-bye to Doug a few hours ago—oh, not an ordinary good-bye, they would still be seeing each other every day for a fortnight or more. But—*good-bye!* She did not cry . . . though she felt very sad (gloriously sad!).

It had all been too romantic for tears.

Romantic—and queer too. Even now there were things about the last twenty-four hours which she did not quite understand.

Why did Ursula not return from Gullick last night? Where had she stayed? What was in the note that Doug had discovered in the cabin, on their return from a jolly evening at Miss Gregson's?

Oh well, the answers were easy, to anyone with Christine's experience of life. Ursula had eloped with Louis Gregson—fascinating foreigner ("he's called Louis and his moustache is awfully foreign," Chris argued with moon). And the note was to explain matters to her husband.

Doug had not behaved as though the shock had left him broken and stunned and in agony. He had seemed wildly excited, certainly, and his eyes, whenever they met Christine's, were glowing with . . . "Oh, I don't know," Christine cried aloud. But such eloquence was intoxicating to remember, afterwards, alone in one's room. . . .

And he had said, "Plenty of time tomorrow"; and when she had asked innocently: "To fetch her back?" he shouted "No, by God" . . . And Aunt Lavvy's smile from her to him had been odd and

wise and just the least little bit triumphant. "We must keep the child out of this as much as possible," Chris had overheard. And Doug's reply, "Thank God you were here!"

And then—and this was the inexplicable part of it all—the next morning Ursula had returned.

The girl in the room knit her brows in utter perplexity. She supposed that Louis had already jilted her: "But she didn't *look* jilted. She looked rather specially beautiful!" Perhaps Gladys Willoughby might be able to clear up the mystery. Only, somehow, Chris did not want to discuss with Gladys any part of her stay at Grey Stone.

Doug and Ursula had talked alone together. And then Doug had come out to her, where she disconsolately crouched, hugging her knees, on the rocks which overhung the purple pools—she named them by the colour of the seaweed. He was very white under his tan. At least, his skin was as bronzed as usual, of course, "but his expression was as though his face were white," Chris explained to the moon, with a little wriggle of impatience.

Doug had been brief and stern, and quite unlike his usual boyish merry self. Unlike last night, too. He had said: "This is good-bye—in a way, brave little girl. Though I dare say I shall go on seeing as much of you as before. But I'd hoped—— Never mind that. It's over. Chris, a decent chap has first of all got to stand by his wife when she's . . . down.

My poor Teddy—I never dreamt she cared for me as much. . . ." He halted abruptly. "You understand? If you don't—you will one day. Or forget. So much the better. I want you to be happy. And, oh my God, I could have made you happy, on some South Sea Island, warm white sand sloping down to the lagoon. . . ."

"It didn't sound so *frightfully* different from Pol-pinnock Cove," reflected Christine. "But then he says he's no good at words."

A small black cloud wobbled jerkily across the sun, blotting it out, just at the moment when he bent and kissed her. His farewell kiss. And Christine knew that for her and for him the brightness of life was over.

True, Aunt Lavvy had been a perfect darling, and had said that Christine must come as her guest to the Laburnums for a really jolly home sort of Christmas. Aunt Lavvy was wonderful; for though she must know that no jollity could really cheer Chris after her tragedy, yet it was sweet of her to try and give her something to look forward to.

Two and a half months. . . . How many of Ursula's sisters and brothers would be there? Nina and Lottie—Aunt Lavvy had told her a little about the Maxwell family—Not Bunny, he was in New Zealand; but Hal, the eldest boy, he would get a holiday from London. . . . He was big and handsome, like Doug, only of course not *so* big and handsome.

Would they give her a pretty room, there? As

pretty as this one? At the boarding-house she had always shared a room with Auntie, but it was much nicer to sleep alone . . . it was lovely being alone in this room . . . even with a broken heart. . . .

Christine sighed contentedly.

THE END



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY, LOS ANGELES

COLLEGE LIBRARY

This book is due on the last date stamped below.

Book Slip—25m-7,'61(C1437s4)4280

College
Library

PR
6037
S839r

UCLA-College Library

PR 6037 S839r



L 005 759 386 5

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



A 001 193 500 4

